



There is no hope for South Sudan without education for Girls

I was born in conflict and grew up in conflict I might as well do something to help resolve conflict. Nyamal Biel Tutdeal (2017)

An Interview with Nyamal Biel Tutdeal, MA Candidate; Arcadia University



Nyamal and I at LIRS Conference 2014 (L4) in Tucson, AZ

I met Nyamal in 2014 at the Lutheran Refugee Academy Event in Baltimore and immediately knew she was special. Nyamal and her family are former refugees from the south of Sudan (now South Sudan) via Ethiopia, where she spent many years in a refugee camp. Nyamal is currently a graduate student at Arcadia University in

Pennsylvania. I recently had the opportunity to interview her for *The Flame*; the Women Graduates -USA monthly newsletter (<http://www.wg-usa.org>).



At the 2016 LIRS Refugee Academy in Washington DC.

Adera: When and how did you become a refugee?

Nyamal: My parents left The Sudan during the second civil war (1983-2005) to seek refuge in Ethiopia where my siblings and I were born. In 1991 my family was separated due to a war that broke out in Ethiopia, forcing some members of my family and I on a 110-mile trek back to The Sudan. My mother stayed in Addis Ababa to seek medical treatment for my younger brother who was born with a birth defect. One year later my mother rejoined us and we were off to an Ethiopian refugee camp again because of the conflict in southern Sudan.

Adera: A 110-mile trek is a very long journey for anyone. Is this similar to the experience of "The Lost Boys"?

Nyamal: Yes, I was a little girl when we did the trek. The story is quite similar, in fact, there were many "Lost Girls" of Sudan who made similar treks but few of their stories have been told.

Adera: Were there schools in the refugee camps?

Nyamal: When my family returned to Ethiopia from Sudan, I was too young in the camps to attend the schools that were available to the children. There was also the language barrier (from Nuer to Amharic) and I found that a great challenge. I started formal school shortly after we settled in Sioux Falls, South Dakota as a 3rd grade student at Franklin Elementary School.

Adera: Given your status as a refugee/former refugee, what obstacles have you had to overcome to get as far as you have in your education?

Nyamal: I have had a number of obstacles, but none big enough to keep me from my goals. The first obstacle I overcame was the language barrier. Additionally, growing up in a single parent household where it became my responsibility to help my mother raise my younger siblings was a challenge. I also had to keep extracurricular activities balanced with my schoolwork in addition to a job as well as the supervision of my siblings. The biggest obstacle I have had to overcome and still work on from time to time is coping with the traumas of war. The things I've seen, the conditions of war, and the loss of many family members are things that have haunted me all of my life. I've learned to cope in healthy ways but that was and is by far the hardest effect of being a refugee.

Adera: You took on the responsibility of guiding your younger siblings but who guided you?

Nyamal: Another obstacle was graduating high school and making it to college without having a mentor to help guide my career in pursuing higher education. I had a bit of guidance from school counselors but nothing extensive. This is common in the homes of refugee and immigrant children simply because the majority of our parents do not

have a clue on how the educational systems in the states work, so many of us are left to figure things out on our own.

Adera: How different or similar is your educational journey to other South Sudanese women and girls?

Nyamal: My educational journey has been similar to other South Sudanese women/girls in the diaspora in that we had to navigate the educational system without any help from our families. I am privileged to be in the first generation of women to actually have a choice to pursue higher education and a career rather than the one choice getting married and having children.

Adera: What dreams/hopes/ambitions keep you pushing forward?

Nyamal: My dream is to go back to the continent and to South Sudan, and be a light and a resource for a young girl somewhere in a refugee camp. It is my mission to let her know it is possible to come from nothing, and make it anywhere, in any field you desire. All it takes is opportunity, hard work and the mindset that you can conquer all. It is important to believe that "your circumstances do not define you."



Nyamal and I running a workshop at the 2016 LIRS Refugee Academy

Adera: What is your hope/dream for other South Sudanese immigrant/refugee women and girls?

Nyamal: My dream is for my South Sudanese women to be at the decision making table and become full stakeholders in our country's affairs. I dream for South Sudanese girls especially in the village, who have the drive and hunger to pursue education but have been denied access to finally be given the opportunity to follow their dreams. Without these opportunities, there is no future for South Sudan.

Adera: What is your area of study right now and why did you choose it?

Nyamal: I am in the International Peace and Conflict Resolution masters program. My concentration is in NGO Management and Social Entrepreneurship at Arcadia University. My plan is to complete my studies at the end of 2017. When I was considering graduate school, a friend told me to look into conflict resolution since it was something I was already doing in my South Sudanese and American community. The more I learned about the program at Arcadia, the more I knew that this program was the one for me. I joke when I am asked why am I in this program...and say "well I was born in conflict and grew up in conflict I might as well do something to help resolve conflict".

Adera: Are you doing any other work in peace/conflict?

Nyamal: Last fall I looked into a workshop/training on Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities(HROC). This training comes out of Rwanda and is about how the community has been able to come together in the reconciliation process. It is a program I hope to study and implement in my peace work within the Sudanese community and indeed

all over Africa and wherever it might be needed. I also am a volunteer facilitator for the Peace Center located in Langhorne, Pennsylvania where I have facilitated trainings and lead workshops on building peace and combating race relations in America.

Adera: What is your career goal?

I want to go back to Africa not just South Sudan. There is something calling me back to the continent. I want to work with displaced populations/refugees/IDPs. I have this crazy idea that by working with the displaced populations especially the girls and women, that I could be a symbol of hope for them. It is important to me for them to know that their stories are worth telling. I also want to work in helping communities heal from trauma so each person can be able to live life fully.

In 2013 a war broke out in South Sudan, which displaced over one million people. The events of 2013 compelled me to do more. In 2014, a cousin of mine, who is also a human rights activist, Kuoth Wiel and I started the NyaEden Foundation, an NGO that seeks to empower women, children, and displaced people in refugee camps, as well as second host countries. Our organization hopes to achieve this empowerment by providing basic necessities such as flashlights, school supplies, hygiene products, and workshops/vocational trainings. Further, NyaEden Foundation also offers mentorship and counseling with a focus on young refugees/former refugee youth.

I invite you to follow <http://www.nyaeden-foundation.org/> for further information. This is a labor of love to provide the tools to young South Sudanese and African women take charge of their own narrative in writing their own stories of struggle and triumph.