

“Now I will go back to the camps, delivering projects that will change lives, supporting refugees to build a future.”

**An Interview
with Lam Joar**

Abstract:

Lam Joar was born in Fangak, Sudan (now South Sudan). At 15, he fled to Kenya to avoid being forced to become a child soldier, where he lived in the Kakuma Refugee Camp. A gifted athlete, Joar was selected to be a member of the first Refugee Olympic Team. Later he became the Camp Coordinator for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Refugee Team. After the Tokyo Olympics, Joar decided to pursue his university degree, ultimately receiving a Masters degree in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies. Today, Joar is a Programme Officer at One Young World. In this interview, Joar speaks with *Transformations* about the experience of being a refugee and his current work to support refugee communities.

Keywords:

Refugee, Sports, Olympics, Sports, Education, Independence

INTERVIEW

Transformations: *How did you come to work on refugee and displaced community issues? Was there a personal moment in your life that led you to do this work?*

Lam Joar: When I was growing up in South Sudan, the environment was very, very fragile. Young kids were being recruited to be child soldiers. There was fighting constantly. We kept running away. We kept hiding. When we would come back, our homes were burned to ashes. That was the life that I had. When I was about 15, I crossed to the neighbouring country, Kenya, entered Kakuma camp, and became a refugee for the very first time. Of course, the refugee camp was a difficult environment, but I had come from an even more difficult environment. That helped me cope with coming to terms that I was going to live there. The only thing that I found was a bit difficult was being in a refugee all by myself at such a young age. My parents did not come along with me. So, I had to make decisions all by myself: Do I go to school in the morning or look for the next meal in the evening? I was young, so sometimes I went without food because my parents did not go along with me. I was lucky to have a guardian who provided a place to sleep, but things were tight to support me with all the other things I needed. That was the difficult part.

Transformations: *When you were in the camp, did you find there was a need among the people in camp to hold on South Sudanese culture? How did that culture translate into the camps? How did it alter your sense of being a refugee?*

Joar: To me, the camp was like a city. I had never been to a big city, so it was quite different. The population of my village was very small. Initially, I was shocked to see so many people in the refugee camp. At first, I did not know we all ran away from our country for safety reasons because of the conflict. I realised that afterwards. We are running away for our lives, for our safety. But the refugees in the camps remained completely attached to their original countries, not the host country where the camp is located. The refugee camps in Kenya are located in the northeastern part of Kenya. This is a very isolated area. We have limited access to everything. We are not integrating with other people. There's nothing that connects us with the local community. So, we are more connected to our own countries.

Eventually, I came to terms with the fact that, now, "I am a refugee." I wasn't proud of it, though. Nobody is proud of being called a refugee. There are so many stereotypes associated with that name. But you are in the camp, you're being fed, cared for, so you have to accept the name. So, I accepted it. And after accepting it, I also came to see the

opportunities that might come from being a refugee. For example, I went to primary school in the camps for free. In South Sudan, our schools are located at quite a distance. So, when you're below the age of 10, if you cannot walk for three hours each way, you wait until you reach the right age to walk that distance to gain access to an education. I did not access formal education before the age of 10. I did go to school after the age of 10, when I was able to walk.

To my surprise in the Kakuma camp, there were more than 300 kids in my class alone. Because we cannot all fit in the classroom at the same time, we were divided into two sections, each section having two groups. One group comes in the morning from eight to twelve and then another group comes in the afternoon. I had moved from where I used to take care of my father's cow and goats to a place where I have an education. And now that I have come to the first world, I know it was not a great education. But I was appreciating it because it was different from where I came from. It was like progress to me. Now my guardian was in a better position than most refugees. He decided to move us to Nairobi with his kids. And in Nairobi, I had a chance to go to public schools, which were free. The government of Kenya provided free primary and secondary education for those who cannot afford to go to private schools. The schools are highly populated by the poorest people in the community. I joined that school, a primary school, and I finished up to class eight in this school.

Transformations: *In Kakuma's classroom, everyone was a refugee. When you were in your new school, did the students from Kenya perceive you as a refugee? Did they welcome you? Or were they hesitant to accept a refugee into their community?*

Joar: To be honest, I was feeling a little bit ashamed to be called a refugee. At that time, I did not know much about being a refugee. What I had in mind is that being a refugee meant being poor. You don't have anything in the society. But I don't want to be seen that way. I grew up in my father's house. We had no money, but we had cows. And this was perceived as wealth in my village. So, I had that pride. I didn't want to beg people for support. But I was a refugee in the country. The teachers knew. They talk about it. And when they talk about it, I feel a bit ashamed because everybody else will look down at me.

Transformations: *It was at this point, you started to play sports at school. Did sports change your status at school?*

Joar: Absolutely. I did very well in sports. I was a runner. I used to run the one hundred meters and the two hundred meters. I used to do relays. I also threw the javelin and played volleyball. My favorite was the javelin because when I was growing up in South Sudan, my job was to

separate the calves from their mothers at grazing points. So, I used to run a lot and I also throw things a lot while looking after the cows. In addition to being good at sports, I was also a very good student. As a result, I received a scholarship to an international secondary school. I took that school to new heights across school competitions. Now, I was valued. I gained self-respect.

Transformations: *When did you become involved in the Olympics? How did that change your sense of what your future? How did it lead you to want to work with refugees?*

Joar: At that time, I did not know that you could make sports a career. At that point, it's like a hobby. You can't tell your parents that "I want to be an athlete after finishing school." In fact, I could have finished a year earlier, but, I had too much stress in my life. I had lost my brother from the village. I couldn't do well in exams for a few months, so I lost my scholarship. I was sent home. So, one year was wasted. I had to go to public school again. When I finished high school, I was 22 years old. I wanted to go home and see my parents. By then South Sudan had become its own country, but another conflict had started in 2013. It was a conflict between two major tribes, one of which was my tribe. When I reached the border, I was told by Kenyan authorities, "You cannot cross if you are from this tribe. You will be killed. You wouldn't even be able to live where your parents are located. Just go back to the camp." So, I went back to the camps. That is when I decided to join the trials for the 2015 Rio de Janeiro Refugee Olympic team. When I passed the trials, I was in the first group to join the team.

In 2015, our team was moved to Nairobi. At this point, many of us on the team did not actually know the meaning of the Olympics. But as we realized more about Olympics, we realized that you could live your life running. Then I was serious about it. I knew very well that I needed to have proper training. I knew proper training may not be available in Kenya. I really wanted to go to 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics. But when I did not get selected for the Olympic team, I decided, "Okay, I think I need to do something else." Now when we were selected as athletes, we were lucky to be treated very differently from the rest of refugees. In our Nairobi training camp, we had so many visitors coming look at us because it was the very first-time refugees were going to compete in the Olympics. It was historic. As a result, I became close with the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) representatives. So, when I did not make the team, I approached them, showed them my qualifications, and stated I would really want to go to university. As a result, the International Olympic Committee and UNHRC joined together to give me a scholarship to do my undergraduate degree.

Transformations: *Earlier, you spoke about how when you went to the refugee camps, you felt a bit ashamed. You didn't consider "refugee" to be a powerful term. Yet, after your university education, you have ended up working on refugee issues. Why did you choose to continue working on this issue?*

Joar: After I stopped running competitively, I made the decision to focus on my education and to change my career trajectory. My undergraduate degree was in business. I really wanted to be a businessman. At this point, with my education and building my own life, I was not having to ask for everything from supporters. I was becoming independent. It was then I realized that there are many things that do not work for refugees. Instead of thinking about my personal interests, I wanted to get personally involved and be part of the solution for all refugees. So, I asked the Tegla Loroupe Peace Foundation founder, Tegla Loroupe, for an internship to work for the team. And from there I gradually grew into the working for the team. Eventually I was promoted to the Camp coordinator, who handles the communication and management for the entire training camp. That is what actually earned me the possibility of taking the refugee team to the 2021 Tokyo Olympics.

Transformations: *When you were an athlete on the Olympic team, were the coaches and staff also refugees? If not, when you joined the team as part of the leadership, do you think having been a refugee gave you a better ability to work with the athletes?*

Joar: The athletes were refugees. But those who are in charge are not refugees. I felt that as much as they know about handling refugees and being sympathetic, there still a lot they need to learn about refugees, especially the unspoken needs for refugee' athletes. Refugee athletes do not feel like they are handled by people who understand their situation. Too often, refugees are perceived as people with so many needs, so many expectations. But, in short, what a refugee needs is a boost to support themselves, to become a real person, to regain the dignity. This is what we all want. Some of us are parents. We are fathers, mothers. But having to imagine your life as being dependent on another person, asking everything from that person, this is what takes away everything. Without any support to become independent and eventually get out of the refugee camp, we are back at the beginning.

So, when I became part of the staff, refugees would very often talk with me. They were very often calling me because I was one of their own. And although I was now working for the team, the athletes don't see me that way. They still saw me as part of them. They would include me in their discussions. They would be open with me, telling me about all the problems. They know I would take the problems to those who are taking care of us. It gave

me a chance to understand both sides very well. Also, after getting away from the team, I gained a little bit of independence. And because I could do my own thing, I became a bit of a role model. I'm part of the staff, so not everything is done for me. So, I also took some time to talk to the team on how they can transition to being independent because they will not be in athletics forever. They need to start learning to do their own things.

Transformations: *That was the team you took the Tokyo Olympics, right?*

Joar: I was on the management team. There were 29 athletes. When we arrived in Tokyo, I was overseeing the runners, giving them any needed information before the competition. I had an amazing experience that I don't think I'll ever have it again.

Transformations: *Looking back on your involvement in the Olympics, from team member to staff member, what were some of the things you had to learn as you moved into professional role? And did any of your experiences as refugee enable your success? Did that experience help you as opposed to always defining being a "refugee" as a negative?*

Joar: When I was in the position of being an athlete, I expected things to be done for me. But when I became a staff or management person, things needed to be done by me, you know? It changed what is expected of me. It changed who I needed to be. I needed to be able to help others. This change ultimately led me to pursue a master's degree in social sciences to learn more about refugees, their rights, their cultures, their diverse backgrounds, and the laws shaping their lives. I wanted to learn how to contribute to uplifting this community – a community that is growing every single day. I wanted to be part of the solutions.

Now I work for One Young World. Our flagship event is the annual One Young World Summit, which convenes the brightest young talent from every country and sector, working to accelerate their social impact. Delegates from over 190 countries participate in four transformative days of speeches, panels, networking events, and workshops. Delegates are also counselled by influential leaders to help nurture and discover the next generation of exceptional young leaders. Over the years, our impact has had a remarkable impact on young people and their communities, however, we are determined to significantly increase the participation of refugees in our Community. To achieve this, we are launching a project that will support 15 young refugee leaders to attend the One Young World Summit in October 2023, being held in Belfast, United Kingdom. As a refugee myself, my experience at the Summit has changed my life, and the connections I made have benefited me greatly.

Transformations: *You have led an amazing life. One that has demonstrated a real commitment to others. A life that maybe did not seem possible when you first entered Kakuma camp at the age of fifteen. When you think back to that time, what might you have told your 15-year-old self? What would you want to say to that person?*

Joar: I would tell my 15-year-old self that I really tried. I would say to him, "I tried because you might have remained in my village. You might have gone into the military. You might not even be alive at this moment if others did not support you." And I think I've been very, very lucky to get such support in my life. I was lucky that my parents sent me away. They saw what was happening. They didn't want me to be recruited as a child soldier, since I was already a big boy. Others were not so lucky. Most of my friends died in the war. For that reason, I have tried too hard to help others who need such support.

I could have achieved more if I grew up in environment like Oxford, where I am at the moment. But obstacles are inevitable. There are moments when the purpose and vision almost is lost. But you have to keep it alive by seeing new things. Seeing people who have managed to succeed in life. There's no limitation. These are the things that drive me to, to achieve more.

I think it's great that my story will be read by many people. They will also see that when you give a refugee a chance, refugees can make it. Now I will go back to the camps, delivering projects that will change lives, supporting refugees to build a future. They are not the stereotypes that you hear being spread. If they are welcomed and accepted and show love, refugees can regain their dignity. They can become like any other person in the society.