

Israeli Woman Fights for Women's Rights in South Sudan

Ophelie Namiech, a former French national, has made Aliyah to Israel and is presently serving as the South Sudan director for IsraAID. The humanitarian organization provides emergency relief and development assistance to different countries across the globe.

In South Sudan, IsraAID is involved in development assistance for the emerging nation.

Helping to Build Israel's Future

Namiech's ultimate professional goal was to build a career that combined her love for the state of Israel with assisting the South Sudanese people.

"I made Aliyah in order to build Israel's future. I wanted to make a difference. I felt I needed to be part of Israel on the inside," she says. "It is such a pride to say that I am Israeli. It's a reason to make Aliyah. Israel was founded based on humanitarian values."

Namiech believes that by working to build relations between Israel and South Sudan and by accompanying the new state in its efforts to build strong economic and social foundations, she is strengthening the role of Israel in international development and humanitarian action (*tikkun Olam*). She says Israel has the opportunity—and the duty—to assist other friendly nations that struggled for their independence—like South Sudan—to build themselves.

Gender Atrocities

Presently, South Sudan, which gained independence in 2011, has a humanitarian crisis in the border regions of the country, as

well as an internal conflict. According to Namiech, "South Sudan was 50 years in war. ... Sexual violence was used as a weapon of war, like is common in East Africa. It was not only used as weapon of war but it is also traumatized the nation. There are not studies on this, but at least two-thirds of the women have faced gender-based violence, rape, sexual violence, domestic violence, etc."

Namiech claims the international community focused almost exclusively on helping out the border regions and did not have the capital city, Juba, as a priority.

"Juba faced rapid urbanization with the massive absorption of refugees, displaced people and migrants seeking better opportunities," she says. "All of this created social and economic pressure on Juba, as well as social challenges. You have five-star hotels for internationals and then a slum area where women and children are being raped."

Namiech personally witnessed a child getting raped by five men and claimed that such things happen on a daily basis.

After IsraAID began assisting local actors in South Sudan, promoting gender equality, other NGOs joined in.

Working to Make a Difference

IsraAID seeks to train social workers, community leaders and teachers to be able to address gender-based violence on their own. Namiech claims that merely providing humanitarian assistance is not long-term thinking, since soon after, once the international actors depart, the aid also goes with them, and without being given the tools to deal with the issue on their own, the South Sudanese won't be able to effect change on their own. This is why Namiech is so motivated to provide local South Sudanese actors with the tools they need in order to make a difference.

IsraAID has successfully developed a positive working

relationship between social workers, teachers and the police.

“As a result of this, there were joint programs. They are doing joint awareness sessions in schools to raise awareness on children’s and women’s rights,” Namiech says.

In addition to assisting with collaboration between various local South Sudanese actors, Namiech has worked with IsraAID to bring in the same Israelis who built the first women’s shelters in Israel to South Sudan to train the locals how to do it. They also bring experienced Israeli therapists to train South Sudanese therapists how to treat trauma victims.

Israel’s Unique Role

Namiech believes that she, IsraAID and the state of Israel have much to contribute regarding promoting women’s rights in South Sudan.

“Israel has an important role to play in the community of nations. I think that Israel has amazing things to share,” she says. “It is not in Israel’s interests to be focused only on regional challenges. Because of the global world where we are living in and because Israel’s strengths, it is our responsibility to open our eyes and self and provide assistance and to accompany countries and communities who experience similar dilemmas and are striving to build a new nation.”

For the original article, visit .