

# OPENING EYES IN POWERFUL WAYS

NIMA ELBAGIR, RECIPIENT OF THE DANIEL PEARL AWARD, SHINES A SPOTLIGHT ON THE DARKEST ASPECTS OF SOCIETY

BY CLAUDIA OBERST

**N**ima Elbagir jumps off a bus heading from Nigeria to Libya in the dead of night.

"We are safe," she says, meaning safe from repeatedly being assaulted, abused and raped.

It is early 2018 and Elbagir just finished her latest undercover assignment: reporting on the dark side of migration by posing as a wealthy Nigerian woman eager to flee to Europe. The human trafficker she hired as part of her investigation told her to bring contraceptives—and not to struggle if she was raped. "Trust in God," he told her.

Elbagir is relieved the journey is over. At least for her and her producer. "It is unimaginable that people are willing to take these risks to make it to Europe," she says before passing the evidence she discovered on to Nigerian authorities.

Elbagir is a senior international correspondent for CNN based in London. For almost two decades, she has reported on conflict and human rights abuses in some of the world's most dangerous regions, often at immense personal risk.

Nima Elbagir, above right, with her father and below with her mother; both parents were involved with journalism.



The Los Angeles Press Club is honoring her tonight with the Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism.

Elbagir has journalism in her blood. Her father founded the Sudanese newspaper *AlKhartoum*. Her mother was the first female publisher in Sudanese history. Elbagir, who was born in Sudan and spent her youth between her native Africa and London, knew from a young age that she wanted to follow in their footsteps.

"I watched my parents while I was growing



## U.S. WEAPONS FALLING INTO THE HANDS OF IRAN AND AL QAEDA-LINKED MILITIA

up, and it looked like such a meaningful way to contribute to the world," she told The Everymom in an interview last year. "In spite of all that they went through, trying to maintain journalistic integrity under the Islamist dictatorship in Sudan, it never seemed anything less than a powerful and meaningful way to make a living."

Elbagir, a graduate of the London School of Economics, has focused her reporting on war zones and civil rights stories. She was the only Western journalist reporting from Mogadishu during the U.S. bombing of Somalia in 2007. She broadcast the first televised evidence of Iranian weaponry smuggled to the Taliban in 2009, and was the first international journalist to report from Chibok, the northern Nigerian village where more than 250 schoolgirls were kidnapped by the terrorist group Boko Haram in 2014.

Elbagir's reporting is fearless. It turns headlines into human stories and puts a spotlight on exploitation and corruption. She is aware of her responsibility to her protagonists and her sources.

"It's a privilege to be trusted by the people you meet to tell their stories, and when you get that right and it impacts their lives for the better, it's an amazing thing," she said last year.

Yet for all her accomplishments, Elbagir knows the job isn't done when her reporting is finished. She uses the material she gathers to push for political and social change. Her work on Yehya Ibrahim, a Sudanese woman sentenced to death for committing apostasy, brought world-

Left and above: In Yemen, she found evidence of U.S. weapons being smuggled to terrorists.

Left, below: Elbagir and her team used concealed cameras while attending a slave auction in Libya and witnessing men held captive.





Above: Elbagir investigated cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo where children are often used for labor. Currently, ongoing efforts struggle to ensure children are not used, but regulating artisanal mines is difficult.

wide attention to Ibrahim’s plight, helping to generate the political pressure that eventually led the Sudanese government to grant her a reprieve.

When Elbagir travelled to Libya in 2017 to report on the migrant slave trade, she and her team used concealed cameras to record a slave auction where people were sold for as little as \$400. Following CNN’s broadcast of the footage, Libyan authorities launched an investigation into slave auctions, protests were organized in cities around the world, and celebrities from the entertainment and music industries spoke out. The UN Security Council, in an unprecedented step, even imposed sanctions on six men who had allegedly made fortunes from buying and selling humans. The piece won numerous accolades, including a Polk Award.

Elbagir often focuses on the weakest members of society, those who lack a voice or whose cries for help go unnoticed. She investigated the use of child labor in cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She covered child marriage in Sudan and interviewed an 11-year-old girl seeking a divorce. She also reported from Sudan on the case of Noura Hussein, the Sudanese teenager who was sentenced to death for killing her rapist husband. Following CNN’s reporting of Hussein’s first-hand account, a Sudanese court overturned her death sentence.

Elbagir says she has developed coping mechanisms for dealing with the psychological toll of her reporting.

“I think anger is a good one,” she told the *Columbia Journalism Review* last year.

CNN’s Jake Tapper, who called Elbagir “a great reporter” in a speech last June, pointed out the dangerous implications of “fake news” allegations for reporters such as Elbagir. He said, “There are journalists out there in dangerous places doing really good work, and important



work that even Donald Trump’s administration has been forced to act to recognize, and when he discredits us for his own personal reasons, it’s discrediting more than just people who write about him.”

Elbagir knows that despite her best efforts, her reporting too often does not lead to real, impactful change. Referring to the migrant situation in Africa, she told the *Columbia Journalism Review* that there had been “minimal changes.”

That doesn’t mean that she’s discouraged. She knows that the only way to better society is to keep pointing out human rights abuses, injustices and maladministration.

“If we keep reminding people to care, ultimately, they will be forced to do something,” she told “The Daily Show” host Trevor Noah last year.

Persistence is part of her DNA. Talking about her newspaper-owner father, who was exiled and jailed several times when Elbagir was growing up, she said, “For me that was a lesson in the power we wield. When people want to establish that we are not to be believed and we are not to be trusted, it’s because they know we are capable of changing the climate and the culture, and opening people’s eyes in really powerful ways.” 🙌

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# NIMA ELBAGIR

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AND INTEGRITY  
IN JOURNALISM

