



CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“ANNA: SOUTH SUDAN’S ONLY FEMALE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF” BY ANNA NIMIRIANO

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



My parents weren't happy when I chose to become a journalist. They said one day I was going to die for it.

But I told them that everyone dies eventually and if God decides that it's my time to go while working as a journalist, so be it.

I started the Juba Monitor newspaper in 2011, the year South Sudan gained its independence from the North.

Together with Alfred Taban, the former editor-in-chief of the Juba Monitor, we moved the paper from Khartoum, The former Sudan capital and current capital of Sudan, where we were both living, to Juba and launched a newspaper in the world's newest nation. **Seven years later and five years into the country's brutal civil war, I've taken over as the country's only female editor-in-chief of a print media outlet.**

In fact, journalism has always been a part of my life. My mother bought me a camera when I was 15-years-old and I used to run around taking photos. I had no idea at the time that I was practicing journalism.

Although I didn't study this profession in university, I always had an interest in writing and I used to write columns for the Khartoum Monitor while I was completing my degree in rural development studies in Sudan.

But I'll never forget the moment that catapulted me into journalism for good.

I was in my early twenties when I read an article in the Khartoum newspaper entitled: Why women are like cans of Pepsi. It was written by a man.

He described a woman's legs and skin tone, talking about the various creams and lotions that we use in order to 'beautify' ourselves, and how we could be likened to a variety of soft drinks.

This article was insulting. Why was it that men felt like they could compare us to soda cans?

So I responded with my own piece, saying that this was a violation of women's rights and no matter what creams a woman uses on her body, no one should be reduced to such narrow standards.

The episode prompted me to delve deeper and find out what was going on with women.

Why do we feel the need to change how we look?

What I discovered was that we did it for men. Monogamy can be a foreign concept in South Sudan and men cheat on their girlfriends and wives regularly. As a result, many women say they alter their appearances in order to keep husbands and boyfriends.

In this pivotal moment, I understood that I was going to fight for women's rights and for all people's rights, wherever I was.

And yes I was aware that working as a journalist in South Sudan and as a female one no less, is exceptionally challenging.

The Juba Monitor began as a weekly publication and quickly grew to a three times a week edition to finally become a daily newspaper.

Since becoming editor-in-chief in July 2017, I've received death threats. The authorities have routinely tried to intimidate me and I am often called in for questioning by the country's National Security service. This government body heavily censors all media coverage and regularly detains and harasses local journalists. I don't recall my predecessor, Alfred, receiving as many death threats, if any at all.

In fact, almost two years ago, before I became editor-in-chief, the country's National Security arm tried to shut down the paper.

It was July 2016, when renewed clashes broke out in Juba, between President Salva Kiir's government forces and troops loyal to former Vice-President, Riek Machar.

I was sitting at my desk in the office when bullets started flying overhead. With my limited safety knowledge, I hid under the table and didn't move for hours. Our entire staff 'slept' in the office that night. Although we didn't get much rest as the sounds of guns and soldiers continued outside. The next morning the soldiers told us to go home. When I opened the door to the street, everything was covered with blood and there were dead bodies scattered on the floor.

We couldn't look too hard at the corpses because the soldiers were watching us. Everyone was terrified. We all kept moving forward, walking down the road until we reached our houses.

Shortly after the attacks, Alfred, the editor-in-chief at the time, wrote an article in our paper demanding the removal of the President and Vice-President. He said as leaders; they had failed the country.

Days after the article was published, Alfred and I were summoned to the National Security offices. They arrested him in front of me and told me that the paper was being shut down indefinitely. They said they called me there to witness Alfred's arrest and to go back to my office and inform the staff that the paper was being banned.

I didn't know what to do, so I called an emergency staff meeting and proceeded to speak to the heads of other media outlets and to the various journalism bodies present in Juba. I showed them the article Alfred had written and asked them to help me get him out of jail and reopen our paper.

But nobody wanted to get involved.

Do you want him to die in there? I shouted at them. **But everyone was too afraid to speak up. They read the op-ed he'd written demanding the removal of the country's leaders and just shook their heads saying: "Oh no no no".**

In the end, only one person offered her help, a local woman by the name of Irene who worked with the Association for Media Development in South Sudan.

Together Irene and I decided to return to National Security and plead the two cases separately: One was the reopening of the paper and the other was Alfred's arrest.

People told us we were crazy and said that we were going to die.

Due to the fighting, millions of civilians were fleeing the country. While most people were headed to Uganda and Kenya, Irene and I were traipsing through Juba's bloodied streets, stepping over dead bodies in order to demand a meeting with the country's most powerful and most feared entity, the National Security Service.

These people had the power to lock you up, kill you and make you disappear – with impunity.

We marched into their office and I told them that they needed to treat the cases of Alfred and the newspaper as two different issues.

I told them that if they shut down the paper, my staff would turn to criminal activity because they'd be out of a job and become desperate for money. We sat there for hours, in their office, refusing to leave until they spoke to us.

In life, when you really mean business you can't leave. You have to target what you want and stick it out. In the end, they agreed to let us reopen the paper but said Alfred had to remain behind bars.

I spent the next two weeks visiting Alfred every day and working to secure his release.

And still, no one would help me. The entire journalism community had left me alone.

Together with his family, we brought Alfred food and medicine as he's diabetic, and finally, after 13 days, he was released on bail.

It's been almost two years and today, Alfred is revered by the journalism and political communities, as one of the country's most outspoken and respected leaders. He has yet to stand trial and most likely never will.

As a journalist we have to do what is right and we have to fight for the sake of those around us. This situation isn't easy, but I love my job, and when my colleagues are in trouble I have to fight for them. It was so painful to see your boss get arrested. All along thinking that he might die in front of me.

I had to stand with and by him. As a human being, this feeling was just there inside of me.

We need the human rights violations to stop in this country, especially for women. Throughout this war and before that, women have been suffering greatly. We're being raped and abused, forced into early childhood marriage.

Even as a professional journalist, if you are a woman, you're treated worse than a second-class citizen.

One night, I was driving home late from the office; it was around 10pm and I was the only woman in a car among a group of men. En route, we were stopped by soldiers at a checkpoint on the road.

"What are you doing here?" They asked me. "Why are you moving at night with men?"

I told them I was coming back from work; they asked me about my line of work then accused me of being a prostitute.

"What kind of work would make you come home so late at night?" They said. "Even in the President's office no one comes home at this time."

I tried to explain that I worked for the Juba Monitor, but they didn't care. They yanked me out of the car and forced me to walk into a very dark place on the side of the road.

"Sit down," they yelled at me. It started to rain, and the ground was wet so I resisted. They asked for my bag and I resisted as well. One of the soldiers pointed his gun at my face as if he was going to shoot me, so I gave him my bag and sat on the ground.

I was sure they were going to kill or rape me and I just kept praying to God saying: "God if I've really come from the office and if this is the true nature of my work, then I believe nothing bad will happen to me."

After a few minutes, another man came to speak to the soldiers and de-escalated the situation. He ordered them to let me go; I got back in the car and we drove away.

This incident is one that continues to haunt me, but there are so many things that occur on a daily basis. It's never ending.

I've been threatened by freelancers whose stories I won't publish because they lack credible sources. I've been intimidated by the government and told that if I cover certain press conferences which subject matter they dislike, I'll be in serious trouble. My staff and I have been detained several times for stories that don't suit the government's narrative. We're not allowed to quote the opposition or tell their side of the story and forbidden to publish pictures of them, including that of their leader and former Vice-President, Riek Machar. If you give them exposure, the government thinks you're an agent of the rebels.

How can you have balanced journalism if you're not allowed to give both sides of the story?

Our newspaper has had articles blacked out seconds before being printed. So when the paper is published there are blank sections where articles once stood.

When I'm called in for questioning, I always defend myself and try to explain why we're doing what we do. If the government tells me not to do something I'll challenge them and ask them why.

No matter how hard it gets, I've never thought of leaving or giving up. In fact, I want to take our paper further. I want to expand its circulation of 2,000 papers a day and reach South Sudanese refugees who have fled this country and are now living in camps in Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and the DRC. They need to know what's going on here so they can decide if they want to come back. Families desperately need to connect with those they've left behind.

Right now we're at a crossroads when the funding we've had for the past year has ended and we're trying to find ways to keep the paper afloat. The economic crisis has made printing extremely costly.

But I keep waving my journalism banner, I keep fighting for peace and to give ordinary citizens a voice. My weapon is my reverence to the truth and my mission is to empower citizens in my country, so new and already so torn away by violence and power struggles.

My message to all journalists is, if you want to join this profession, let it come from your heart. If you're forced into this then if anything happens to you, you'll leave. If it comes from your heart you'll continue, no matter the suffering, you'll keep going.

And to all women in the media, do your work without fear and do it professionally. Because it can save your life and it can save the lives of others. Do allow your daughters to become journalists. Ones that can fight back when they are reduced to something as insignificant as a soda can.

Let women show what they have in store when it comes to fighting for justice and establish peace at last.

