

Breaking through

Marketing your family business in a war-torn country might sound like a heavy cross to bear. But for Wafa Elnefeidi, third-generation general manager at Sudan's Elnefeidi Group, the main challenge stems from gender inequality. **Michael Finnigan** reports

Keeping a business afloat through two rounds of north-south civil war is no easy task. Imagine then the challenges of building out a marketing department in the same environment. Yet at the Elnefeidi Group, one of Sudan's most prominent family-owned conglomerates, marketing has been a staple for more than 80 years.

"The group has seven main divisions. Each one has its own bespoke marketing department and advertising strategy," says third-generation Wafa Elnefeidi, who graduated in business and cross-cultural communications from the University of Arizona and spent two years working in marketing at the Bank of Khartoum. "When I joined the family business five years ago, the elder generation had just formed a new marketing department to oversee and bring cohesion to the company's various marketing teams. I work as a manager within that department."

The family's decision to professionalise the marketing department, one that Elnefeidi says gave her the opportunity to prove her worth, came at a difficult time, just one year after South Sudan gained independence to become the youngest country in the world. "South Sudan's independence left Sudan with a 40% smaller market. It's a difficult situation but I've always tried to live by the rule of 'If life gives you lemons, make lemonade' and that has helped me see the new business landscape as an opportunity to help expand Elnefeidi Group's presence as a trusted and respected brand."

Yet operating in the male-dominated Sudan means that Elnefeidi has struggled to develop the project. The elder generation, while supportive of their children, plan to handover control in due time, which is sometimes a source of frustration for the third-gen. But to understand how she has arrived at this point, she says it is important to understand the history of the business. ➤



Above: Third-generation Wafa Elnefeidi received her degree in cross-cultural communications from the University of Arizona, before returning to Sudan to work in her family's conglomerate, the eponymous Elnefeidi Group. The eight-decade-old business operates across five African countries and has interests in agriculture, mining, real estate, and logistics. The backbone of the company is its logistics business Reiba



As Elnefeidi explains, a little over eight decades ago in Khartoum – the Sudanese capital and second largest city in the country – her grandfather, Bashir Elnefeidi, founded a small retail shop in a local marketplace as a 17-year-old with the intention of selling soap. With the help of his two brothers, Bashir expanded the small shop into a larger wholesale outlet and by the 1970s had diversified into livestock, transportation, and oil.

Today, the conglomerate operates in the agriculture, automotive, commercial, food, logistics, mining, and real estate sectors. Elnefeidi Commercial Transport was the cornerstone of its financial success, and began operations in 1988 with 15 Fiat trucks. The business has since expanded to 600 trucks and trailers to become the largest inland logistics companies in Sudan and one of the largest in Africa. Today, the group makes most revenue from Raiba - part of its logistics division.

While the conglomerate has many wholly-owned subsidiaries, Elnefeidi says that partnerships have always played an important role in the group's business strategy, which includes important contracts from Fly Dubai, Samsung, and Nissan. Through their companies Bashir Motors and Nefeidi Motors, they are the official distributor of Nissan Infinity motor vehicles in the country.

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The company does not disclose financial information, but currently operates across five African countries, including Chad and Cameroon. Elnefeidi says the firm's success is largely due to the vision of founding father Bashir, who hoped for an international business that developed communities.

“Bashir was a natural entrepreneur, even before he made his money. He would visit rural areas and do whatever he could to build his business while developing opportunities for those in the community. It was very important for him to help people along the way, which is why he founded the Bashir Elnefeidi charity very early on. His drive to help communities is why the group has had success.”

Today the whole family is involved in the business, under second-generation Amin Elnefeidi, who has been at the helm since 2008. Third-generation Elnefeidi is a manager in the marketing department, while her brother and sister are managing director and general manager in the automotive and car rental divisions respectively.

While the family are supportive of the next generation, Elnefeidi feels that the Sudanese business landscape is a lot less open to women in the workplace than the American market where she cut her teeth, adding that many are reluctant to engage with her as a result of her gender.

The situation and role of women in Sudan has been heavily influenced by the history of conflict and in 2012 the country was given the lowest possible ranking for gender inequality among repressive regimes by US NGO Freedom House.

Despite this there have been some positive changes in Sudan. As of 2012, women made up 24.1% of the National Assembly of Sudan and the right to equal pay was recently enshrined in Sudan's constitution. While such moves are undoubtedly a step in the right direction, Elnefeidi says inequality in the country remains rife.

“Sudan has made significant strides with regards to gender inequality. But the gap between men and women is

unusually large for a country that has had women in parliament since the 1950s. If you think of the United States at that time you'll recall that women couldn't even vote but today it is a far more equal society”, she says.

The next gen believes she is most disadvantaged during networking events, where invitations go out mainly to men, and said that this is where the majority of deals are struck. She feels that if she can't even get her foot through the door then it will be difficult to break the glass ceiling. Elnefeidi picked out individuals from rural areas and government entities as being particularly difficult to work with, but says that the inequality has only tempered her determination to succeed.

At the Elnefeidi Group, the second generation has implemented strict policies to ensure men and women are treated equally. As she explains: “In the business we have a family protocol, which clearly states that there is no difference between a man and a woman, especially now that we are in the third generation and more women are involved in the business. We firmly believe that it is hard work that gets your there”.

Opposite: The Elnefeidi Group's headquarters is based in Khartoum, Sudan, but has operations in four other African countries, including Chad, Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Djibouti

Below: Sudanese National Assembly in Khartoum, Sudan, where 25% of seats are reserved for women.



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While the Elnefeidi Group takes a progressive stance on gender, Wafa says more can be done to ensure women are treated in the same manner in Sudan. She hopes to equip the next generation of the Elnefeidi clan with the skills needed to gain recognition for their hard work and serve as a role model for women in the country.

Gender equality is not the only area in which disparity exists in Sudan. In the marketing and advertising sector there is a huge gap between local and international standards, which is why many advertising executives believe Africa is the next big market opportunity, after China, Latin America, and India.

While newspapers elsewhere in the world become less prominent, due to shrinking advertising revenue and online competition, they are still dominant in Sudan, where expensive online browsing has allowed the printed word to thrive. Window and sidewalk displays and outdoor advertising are principal marketing aids and there is a burgeoning market for mobile advertisements.

Even though the Elnefeidi Group has marketing departments within each of their divisions, the third gen says there was little cohesion between departments when she re-joined the family business in 2012 and with

the help of the company's marketing director identified it as an area for improvement.

“When we discussed expanding the marketing department, some of the older generation were unsure about the idea because it is such a fledgling industry in Sudan. Marketing is also difficult to quantify, and the elder generation also like to test you. They want to see whether you trust your idea and whether you will follow it through, so it's been a long process,” she explains.

While one half of the elder generation were sceptical of the idea, the other half saw it as a good example of how the third generation could bring new concepts and perspectives to the business.

Earlier this year, Elnefeidi began work on a partnership with an international advertising agency in order to manage the conglomerate's image as well as that of local clients. The partnership is the first of its kind at the Elnefeidi Group and the partners are currently considering the next phase in its development. The next gen hopes it will demonstrate the value of marketing to family members.

Elnefeidi is also interested in corporate social responsibility and in January 2015 led a project to aid the Khartoum Breast Care Centre's annual charity event. She says the VIP event was extremely successful and generated the highest amount of donations compared to similar teams.

While the next gen hopes to continue developing her charity work as well as the marketing department, she hasn't ruled out gaining further experience outside of the family business. She is currently looking to Europe or the Middle East. “The family protocol calls for family members to gain two years' experience outside the business before they join. I've recently realised that it's OK to continue your professional career in external roles. That way you can truly add value.” **FB**