



Dr Noeleen Heyzer, who held the post of Undersecretary-General of the United Nations from 2007 to 2015, signing a copy of her memoir *Beyond Storms And Stars* during its launch last Friday. PHOTO: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

# Singaporean trailblazer at UN recounts challenges in memoir

Goh Yan Han

She grew up in an impoverished household, started school late at the age of eight and, at one point, had her education interrupted. She also spent a stint in a girls' home.

But Dr Noeleen Heyzer rose to become Undersecretary-General of the United Nations, a post she held from 2007 to 2015, making her the highest-ranking Singaporean in the UN system during her term.

The challenges she faced and how she overcame them are recounted in her 240-page memoir *Beyond Storms And Stars*, which was launched at the Singapore Management University (SMU) last Friday, with Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam in attendance.

Mr Tharman said Dr Heyzer is "one of the most remarkable Singaporeans of her generation and a beacon for women all over the world".

He added: "We must learn from her life and everyone have that same moral conviction, and the ability to translate moral conviction into practical reality, step by step."

A social scientist, Dr Heyzer was the first woman to serve as the executive secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific since it was founded in 1947, which she did from August 2007 to January 2014.

She was also the longest-serving executive director of the UN Development Fund for Women (Unifem).

She is currently a member of the UN Secretary-General's High Level Advisory Board on Mediation, which supports specific mediation efforts around the world. She is also a Lee Kong Chian distinguished fellow at SMU.

At the launch event, a panel discussion with Dr Heyzer, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh and SMU president Lily Kong covered how Dr Heyzer had used the values and the platform of the UN to advance gender equality worldwide and contribute to a more in-

clusive and sustainable Asia-Pacific region.

The panel was moderated by Professor Chandra Kukathas, dean of SMU's School of Social Sciences.

Professor Koh said one lesson from the book was to not be a status quo leader, but a visionary one like Dr Heyzer.

"When she arrived at the UN, gender equity or equal rights of women was a niche issue. Because of Unifem's good work, gender equality became a mainstream issue at the UN and violence against women became an international issue," he said.

Professor Kong said that a lesson she took away "is that we each must figure out our own *ikigai*, our own reason for existence, our reason for being, and when we then learn to work together with other like-minded people, impact can be so very powerful."

Dr Heyzer also explained the reason for the title of her memoir. The storms refer to the challenges in her life.

As for the stars, she said: "It comes from the line, 'Too low they build, who build beneath the stars'. There are times in our lives where if we are to repair the past to create anew, to reimage and remake our future for the next generation, we need to build beyond the stars."

She added: "I realised in my life's journey that you are never alone. Everything that I think I've achieved has been done through individual effort but also through collective support."

The book costs \$23 from [www.blinks.com.sg](http://www.blinks.com.sg)

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## CHANGING THE STATUS QUO

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**AMBASSADOR-AT-LARGE TOMMY KOH**, on Dr Noeleen Heyzer's work at the United Nations