

LunchWithSumiko



Her extraordinary story

Noeleen Heyzer's memoir looks back at how she overcame a difficult childhood to scale the career ladder at the United Nations. She tells Executive Editor Sumiko Tan she has always felt compelled to speak out for those who can't.

Dr Noeleen Heyzer is credited with saving Unifem from financial collapse and turning it into a force fighting for women's empowerment. She rebuilt the UN agency's finances through persuading countries to contribute to it, worked with influential thinkers to strategise programmes, and organised conferences. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN



Back in the 1990s when Noeleen Heyzer was in charge of Unifem, a United Nations agency that helped women, people meeting her for the first time would often be surprised. "There was always a big joke that when I got down from the plane, people said, 'Oh my god, we thought that we were receiving this very tall, redhead woman, and here you come'," she says, laughing at the memory.

Dr Heyzer is in fact petite and brown-haired. The expectations of strangers were probably as much to do with her European-sounding surname as her accomplishments.

From 1994 to 2007, the Singaporean social scientist headed the United Nations Development Fund for Women, or Unifem, as its executive director. She is credited with saving the grant agency from financial collapse and turning it into a force fighting for women's empowerment.

From 2007 to 2015, she was a UN under-secretary-general, the equivalent of a Cabinet minister. She served as executive secretary of Escap, which stands for the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. She was the first woman to lead Escap, and worked with governments of more than 50 countries to address issues like poverty and natural disaster management.

Her career at the global body is all the more remarkable given how she had carved it out herself and not, say, on the back of serving in Singapore's civil or foreign service.

How she did it is told in her memoir, *Beyond Storms & Stars*, which was recently published by Penguin.

The 220-page book traces her childhood and career and also reveals details about her marriage to Mr Fan Yew Teng, a Malaysian opposition politician and social activist who died in 2010.

Over WhatsApp, I ask Dr Heyzer where she would like to have lunch. She's not good with restaurants, she says, but was invited to TungLok Signatures in Orchard Rendezvous Hotel during Chinese New Year and found the food delicious. "Just keep the lunch simple," she adds.

I make a reservation for noon at the Chinese restaurant - we're given a room with a beautiful floral wall panel - and arrive a few minutes before her.

At 73, she wears her age well. She looks elegant in a drapery beige top over an orange skirt and low-heeled pumps. Her hair, like in photos I've seen of her, is shoulder length and curly.

Her manner is warm and kindly, and she has a voice that carries across the room, no doubt a legacy of years spent giving speeches.

Dr Heyzer, who has a PhD in social sciences from Cambridge University, speaks in long, free-ranging paragraphs, often veering into multi-syllabic

academic and NGO jargon. Words like gender mainstreaming, transformation, framework, displacement and human spirit populate her answers during our three-hour lunch, which is fun and enjoyable if at times difficult to follow.

But there's also a down-to-earth side and she has good people skills. I had pre-ordered from the set menu and the food is plentiful, delicious and served with flourish. Crisp-fried tiger prawn is followed by double-boiled fish maw soup, steamed fish, duck skin with foie gras in a pancake, braised noodles and aloe vera lemon jelly.

"This is amazing," she exclaims when the waiter brings in the soup served inside a carved-out coconut. "Wow, oh you are spoiling us today," she tells the waiter when he reappears with an elaborately plated dish. "There will be no dinner after this, and no lunch for the next two days." He looks pleased.

When the restaurant manager drops by to say hello, she is chuffed when Dr Heyzer remembers her name from the previous visit. (The manager hands me a namecard later and I see Dr Heyzer had got the name right.)

LIVED EXPERIENCE

Although she has retired from the UN, she has been busy with academic and other engagements. Among other things, she's a member of the UN Secretary-General's High Level Advisory Board on Mediation, which supports specific mediation efforts around the world, and a fellow at the Singapore Management University.

Her work has seen her based in Sussex, Kuala Lumpur, New York and Bangkok. She has been home the past two years because of Covid-19, and also to be with her aunt, who's 91, and her 89-year-old uncle.

Her 43-year-old twin daughters are Malaysian. Pauline is director of the George Town Literary Festival in Penang, and Lilliane is based in KL where she works on refugee policy and humanitarian diplomacy in South-east Asia.

She was originally planning an academic book of her past speeches and the pivotal moments of her time in the UN, but her daughters had other ideas.

"They said, 'Mum, our generation will not be so interested in that. Could you tell a

different story, something that would uplift and inspire, but also make sense of some of the issues that we are struggling with, and to please do it in a way that we will be excited about?" she recounts.

She hesitated because "I'm trained as an academic and I'm trained to solve problems, not to tell stories". But they pushed her to write a more personal tale. "They were not easy editors, to be honest," she smiles.

What changed her mind was how people who know her as a successful professional have tended to assume she spoke about women's struggles from an academic angle. "Everybody thought, 'you're born with a silver spoon'," she says. On the contrary, she's had her struggles and that gave her empathy.

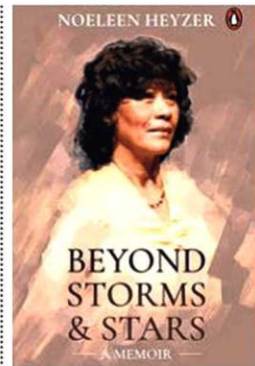
She was born in 1948, the elder of two children. Her Chinese mother worked as a secretary in the British army base in Selatar.

Her father was a Dutch burgher - his Dutch-German ancestors had lived in Sri Lanka and intermarried - and grew up in Calcutta. He was trained in homeopathy and came to Singapore as a medic in the British army, which was how he met her mother.

When the war ended, he could not practise because he didn't have proper certification. Consumed by rage, he became violent.

The family was living with her maternal grandmother and the extended family in a kampung in Telok Kurau. One night, her father stormed out of the house in a fit of rage, "purposely crashed his boneshaker car into a coconut tree outside, and disappeared", she writes in her memoir.

Her mother became the main breadwinner. Being Catholic, she was not allowed to divorce. "We were stigmatised as being a broken family. My mother was trapped in this social landscape and had no space of her own to process what was happening... there was no social support and little



Dr Heyzer's memoir traces her childhood and career, and also reveals details about her marriage.

community empathy," she writes, wearing her sociological lens. When Dr Heyzer was six, her mother, then 26, died. "She had lost the will to live."

A few days later, her father showed up to take her and her brother away from their beloved grandmother to live with him and his new wife.

There followed six years where the family moved from Balestier to a shophouse in Chinatown. The family was poor and life was complicated. "Perhaps it was then that a spirit of resistance began to stir imperceptibly within me."

She was eight when she entered Primary 1. At the Catholic school in Thomson, she experienced "elitism, class arrogance and social inequality". For a time, she was put in Mount Emily Girls' Home because of her family situation.

When she was 12, her maternal grandmother rescued her. Her brother remained with their father and she was not allowed to see him again till he turned 21.

Life with her grandmother, uncle Paul and two aunts - Lily and Anne - (her daughters are named

after them) was stable. She thrived at Katong Convent and studied sociology at Singapore University before going to Cambridge on a Ford Foundation scholarship.

Her grandmother was a resourceful woman who managed to scrape enough money to buy land in Siglap to build a brick house. Lily was secretary to the CEO of a British motor company, Anne was the first Asian Mother Provincial of the Holy Infant Jesus in Malaysia, and her uncle Paul was a popular maths tutor.

In the book and during lunch, she speaks about her relatives with love and gratitude. Her grandmother and Anne have since died, and her apartment in Singapore is 10 minutes away from where Lily and Paul live.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

One of the most interesting segments of the book is about her marriage. In past stories done on her, she had always referred to her husband as a writer in Malaysia.

It is the first time she is revealing his name. "I struggled with it for a long while," she says. "I'm basically a private person so it was very hard for me to cross certain lines."

She met Mr Fan when she was a student and a member of Singapore University's Democratic Socialist Club. The club had sent her on a study trip to Europe and she saw him at a concert hall in Salzburg. "He exuded charisma, confidence, and an aura of powerful energy".

Six years older than her, he had led a nationwide teachers' strike in Malaysia. They fell in love and got married. He had a fear of flying and when she went to Cambridge later, he took three months to join her via an overland route.

He was acting secretary-general of the Democratic Action Party and a twice-elected Member of Parliament. In 1971, he was arrested under the Sedition Act for remarks on multiracialism he had published. He was later convicted and disqualified from Parliament, and became a writer.

Reading between the lines in her memoir, there were tough moments in the marriage. "The world of opposition politics was cruel to families and to relationships," she writes. She accepted the Unifem offer in New York so she and the twins could get away from the "nastiness of politics that surrounded" him.

She learnt to create a two-track world. "He had his world that I refused to be pulled into, and I had my professional world that he respected and did not participate in," she writes. "What kept us together was our deep love for our children and for one another."

In 2007 when she became executive secretary of Escap in Bangkok, the family was able to reunite after 13 years of being apart. He died of cancer in 2010 in a Bangkok hospital.

Was it hard to be away from him for so long, I ask her. "It was not so difficult because I was so engaged in my work and looking after the children," she says. "And in my free time, I'm not going to mope. I'm one of those who would look for all the beautiful things to do, to live in beauty, so I would listen to music, I would take walks, and I love New York in the fall."

ME TIME

Her career in fact started at the Chartered Bank after she got her bachelor's degree. She didn't enjoy banking. After she got her doctorate, she joined the Institute of Development Studies in the University of Sussex to do research.

Three years later, she took her first UN job at Escap in Bangkok to work on youth unemployment. She didn't like the culture there and left to join an intergovernmental think-tank in KL. She was to return to Escap more than a decade later to head it.

In KL, her work on workplace protection for women and the rights of migrant foreign domestic workers got her noticed, and she was offered the job at Unifem.

She rebuilt the agency's finances through persuading countries to contribute to it, worked with influential thinkers to strategise programmes, and organised conferences. She is recognised for her role in the UN Security Council's Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in 2000.

It couldn't have been easy rising up the UN career ladder, I say. "I think I never worked with a career in mind. I respond to what is needed," she replies.

A prime motivation for her has been to "make sure that the voices of the forgotten were heard". "And of course the voices of the forgotten half of the world happen to be women. They are not part of the decision-making to shape the social arrangements, they were undervalued when they came to work. I focused a lot on that."

She had the trust of both the people on the ground - she was big on field work and visited many vulnerable communities - and those at the top.

"I genuinely feel that the best policies come from good analysis and listening to the voices of people," she says. "In a sense I was able to bring multiple voices together, and to have the trust of all the multiple partners to focus on specific problems and to find solutions that work for all."

She was also at the right place at the right time. The end of the Cold War saw the UN engaged in a series of conferences to reshape the new development agenda. "They were looking for somebody who could pull all those pieces together but also understand the much larger context."

I wonder what her brand of feminism is. "Actually, I don't even have a brand of feminism," she says. "People call me a feminist but all I care about is... there is no excuse to devalue women's lives."

"We are all the poorer if we devalue women's experiences and expertise. If we don't value care work, if we don't understand what it means to nourish not just our homes but our societies, how do we strengthen the social fabric of life?"

Now that the book is done, she longs to find the time to read, listen to music and, when borders open, to catch the cherry blossoms in Japan.

Is she in a relationship? She laughs. "No, that's not what I need in my life. I'm happy with the freedom I have. This is the time that I want to invest in myself, look after my ageing relatives, and spend time with my daughters."

It's past 3pm by the time we finish. She's off to settle a medical-related issue for her aunt - caregiving work that is often the lot of women, but something you sense she is happy to do in this case.

As we bid farewell, she says, warmly: "Next time, it's my treat - and I want to find out more about you."

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• *Beyond Storms & Stars*: A Memoir by Noeleen Heyzer (\$28.78) is available at major bookstores.



WHAT WE ATE

2 set menu @\$78++ each

Crisp-fried tiger prawn; flambe double-boiled fish maw soup; steamed soon hock belly in bean sauce; sliced duck skin with foie gras served on pancake; braised noodles; chilled aloe vera lemon jelly

Total (with GST): \$197.70



SCAN TO WATCH

Dr Noeleen Heyzer on speaking out for those who can't. <https://str.sg/lws26>

