



THE HEYZER EFFECT

United Nations Under-Secretary-General DR NOELEEN HEYZER brings unspoken and unseen realities to the policy table. She chats with LAUREN TAN for this International Women's Day special

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WHEN THREE WOMEN from Africa and the Arab world (Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman) were named recipients of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, United Nations' most senior official in Asia Dr Noeleen Heyzer, was jubilant. It was the first time the Nobel Committee's citation made direct reference to Security Council Resolution 1325 — a landmark resolution on women, peace and security — of which Singapore-born Heyzer, herself a 2005 Nobel Peace Prize nominee, played a critical role in shaping.

Whether she is engaging thought leaders or working in a factory line (for research into labour issues in the 1970s), Heyzer has, since the earliest days of her career, sought to incorporate the realities of the disadvantaged into the larger decision-making agenda. A former International Labour Organisation researcher and later a policy advisor to Asian governments on gender issues, she joined the UN in 1982 and in 1994 became the first woman outside North America to head the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem, now UN Women).

Under her leadership, Unifem made great strides seeing through both the historic adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325 and in assisting more than 100 countries on legislation and policies that promote women's security and rights. In 2007, after 14 years of shaping the organisation's agenda on women's empowerment and gender equality, Heyzer was appointed under-secretary-general for Asia Pacific and executive secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (Escap), the regional arm of the UN. This makes her the first woman to occupy the position since 1947.

Bangkok-based Heyzer has now turned her attention to achieving inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific through intra-regional trade, financial stability, responsible investment, environmental sustainability, social justice and gender equality.

Let's start at the beginning. How did a young Noeleen Heyzer start on the path of a change agent?

It was growing up in Singapore in the 1950s, in old Chinatown actually, where both the resistance and solidarity came together to create a new Singapore that was coming out of the colonial system. It was later at university that I realised the changes I saw were part of a much larger change in the global order. I had been given the opportunity to travel to Scandinavia to learn "the third way" and was able to engage with Gunnar Myrdal, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics who had just finished his classic study of poverty, *Asian Drama*. Fast forward to today, Asia, despite its problems, is

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the centre of the global economic recovery. So for me, both as a Singaporean and Asian, I think the idea that we can create a future — one that can inspire both those around us and our younger generation to continue for a more sustainable future of shared prosperity — is something that is almost ingrained. I think we live with hope and we live with possibilities.

Were there first-hand experiences that sort of nudged you into giving voice to the marginalised?

As a child, one of the things I noticed around me was that although people held jobs, they were not necessarily able to get out of poverty because of the nature of their work. So I've always been very conscious of the fact that we must provide not only decent work, but also work that is just and fair, and for as many people that we can. Also through my research with the International Labour Organisation in the 1970s, what I found was that there was such a lot of casual or informal employment, most of which are filled by women, even when we became the manufacturing base for the global economy. Of course, I wanted to know what was actually happening and so took a job as a textile worker in Singapore as part of my PhD thesis. Later in Malaysia, where I focused my work on production systems in the rural sector, I was exposed to the estate workers. So all that then brought me to issues beyond labour to look at the lives of women, many of whom were migrant workers supporting their families.

Would you describe yourself as a natural born leader?

I think I am a natural leader in the sense that I somehow always felt that the authorities at that time never got it right fully. Therefore, one of the things that I have always challenged myself with is in bringing in the silent voices and the unseen, unspoken realities to the policy table to make that change.

But as an Asian and as a woman, did you ever imagine that you'd end up standing on the world stage?

I didn't intend to but I believe that there are forces of history that shape us and we also shape forces of history. I think because I am by nature a shaper and a catalyst, I'm not one to take things for granted, and so I always try to shape things for the better. It so happens that much of what I was doing coincided with what the UN was very interested in.

How did Security Council Resolution 1325 — which attaches importance to women's experiences in situations of armed conflict and calls for their greater participation in issues relating to peace and security — come about?

When I was covering the globe working on development issues, I realised many countries were affected by conflict and war — identity-based conflict, separatist insurgency, inter and intra state conflict, and the global war on terror. From Bosnia

to Rwanda to Liberia to Afghanistan and East Timor, I saw that conflict was a reality affecting the daily lives of millions of people in devastating ways. So I decided to look at the peace and security agenda on behalf of women and girls who I realised had been overlooked. But I didn't want it to come out of a victim's perspective. So the issue of justice in the context of peace was critical, as was getting these issues onto the peace table, and then in the reconstruction of communities and of states where you have to rebuild trust, greater accountability and livelihood security through citizenship engagement. This was how 1325 came into being and I'm very pleased to say that it was drafted out of my office [as then-executive director of Unifem], but of course it was the Security Council that had to approve it and ensure its implementation.

A direct reference was made to 1325 when the Nobel Peace Prize was recently awarded to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman.

Yes. It's a wonderful acknowledgement of the work that has been done. In fact, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the president of Liberia who is a good friend, was engaged as a consultant to work on the Unifem report "Women, War and Peace" immediately following the passage of Security Council Resolution 1325. Very interestingly, at that time, she said to me, "I am not a feminist, I was a finance minister. Why are you involving me in these issues?" And I said to her, "What I need is a finance minister who understands these issues." Eventually when she decided to run as president of Liberia, she knew the issues to take on.

After Unifem, you were appointed executive secretary of Escap in 2007. Was the move a natural evolution for you?

No, it was a really big jump! I think I got the reputation of building up institutions and the secretary-general asked that I bring dynamism back to the largest Economic and Social Commission. I have to say I've been very fortunate because in Unifem, I was tasked to look at the agendas that affected 50 percent of the world's population, and with Escap overseeing the Asia Pacific, it's now 60 percent. So in a sense I get to expand my own creativity and create new possibilities in a region that is undergoing so much change.

What were some of the challenges you faced?

Around the time I came into Escap, we were hit with the Global Financial Crisis. So the challenge for the Asia Pacific region was in sustaining economic growth at a time when the global economic systems were not supportive of the old model of development. In the new model, we now have to look at regional connectivity — the idea of the good neighbourhood — we have to look at increasing income security so that people can participate in the marketplace and in strengthening

resilience and social protection because of the convergence of multiple threats from financial crisis to fluctuating food and energy prices and natural disasters. So while there may be a convergence of challenges, these can be converted into new possibilities; we have to turn our stumbling blocks into the building blocks of the new economy.

You travel around the region in the course of your work. Are there times when the heart wrenching gets etched into your mind?

Yes, of course. I just visited Bangladesh because we've been promoting access of the disabled and disability rights. But what I discovered instead was the cause of many people's disability. This centre I visited had muscular, able-bodied men who were disabled in workplace accidents. One fall carrying a heavy load or climbing up a high construction site means one loss of a breadwinner and a whole family falls into poverty. And really, it's simple innovation such as using a wheelbarrow that doesn't cost very much but would save lives and unnecessary human suffering. I was also present during the Thai and Pakistani floods, visited Chengdu, China after the earthquake, and Myanmar after the 2008 cyclone. The world is experiencing an increase in natural disasters and exposure to extreme weather conditions, and we still don't have the necessary protection systems in place such as micro-insurance for crops in rural economies. There's not enough resilience and preparedness built into our development strategies.

Is it important to personally see what is happening on the ground?

Absolutely. A fundamental part of my role is to bear witness to the realities of people's lives. I am fortunate to be able to live and work with passion and compassion. I bring a lot of energy to my work. So I need to first get a clear view of situations and a deeper understanding of critical issues so that I can advocate for the responses and changes that are needed. Then I need to be able to inspire people and convince them of what needs to happen so as to build the momentum for change.

You talk about having to inspire people with your passion. Are you always conscious of what you do and say?

Well I am spontaneous by nature, so I don't rehearse everything I do and say! I feel that I have an internal compass that guides me, and I try to live with enthusiasm and energy so that people will realise that doing this type of work is not necessarily overwhelming, even though it takes enormous commitment. I try to show that the work can, and does, give me a lot of satisfaction and a lot of joy. It can also be tiring as there are so many struggles to undertake, but at the same time, it's a very noble job that I'm very privileged to do, and so I do it with a smile.

So do you wake up in the mornings thinking, "I can change the world"?

That is so much in my DNA and part of my instincts that I don't even think it — I just know it!

For those who want to make a difference but are new to voluntary or philanthropic work, how would you advise them to start out?

First it's important to realise that there are different ways of contributing to change. There are those, like myself and many others, who choose to dedicate our lives to social justice in a highly professional manner, and that takes a lot of specialised



Dr Noeleen Heyzer holding bilateral talks with Microsoft Corporation Chairman Bill Gates in Jakarta in May 2008. Discussions focused on the potential of ICT as a tool to reduce inequities and build more inclusive and sustainable societies in the Asia-Pacific region



Dr Noeleen Heyzer and Dr Surin Pitsuwan, secretary-general of Asean together with local village children in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis during her visit to the Ayeyarwady Delta in Labutta, Myanmar, in June 2008



Photo: Al Yurkin



Photo: Ms. Witsabuk Aunrewekui, ESCAP



Photo: Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar

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FROM LEFT: United Nations Under-Secretary-General Dr Noeleen Heyzer consoling two young girls who survived a major earthquake in the province of Sichuan in September 2008; Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen and Dr Noeleen Heyzer at the Escap Distinguished Person Lecture on *Peace, Violence and Development in Modern Societies*, in Bangkok in July 2010; Dr Noeleen Heyzer meeting with then-Prime Minister of the Union of Myanmar, General Thein Sein, in Nay Pyi Taw in December 2009

training, experience, expertise and discipline — like any other profession. For those who would like to volunteer or contribute as philanthropists, I would say first find out what gives you real meaning, and then invest in that. There are so many ways to get involved as there is so much that needs to be done in the world today and you could make a difference by understanding where to best use your skills and creativity.

If you could lock yourself with any five world leaders in a room, who would you seek out?

I have regular opportunities to deal with world leaders and leading thinkers, but I'm not sure I would put them all in a room together. They might end up quarrelling! I'll tell you who I would talk to instead. I would, and I have, talked to the top private sector people, one of whom was Bill Gates who has put in a lot of money and time into developing energy sources, an area I think could be interesting. I have also spoken to some of the best economic thinkers such as Nobel Prize winners Professor Joseph Stiglitz, whom I brought to Myanmar, Professor Armartya Sen, a close friend who has worked on human development and social justice, and Professor Robert Mundell, with whom I have been engaging on global financial issues. I would also talk to political leaders who have set new standards of leadership in our world today such as Nelson Mandela, and I would also spend time with those such as Mother Theresa who have sacrificed their lives serving in the most difficult communities without expecting recognition.

One of your twin daughters has taken a somewhat similar path as you.

Yes, Lilianne has been involved professionally in humanitarian work since 1999. She was doing her PhD under scholarship at Oxford but put her studies on hold when the Tsunami happened in 2004 to spend four years in Aceh working on the reconstruction effort. After that she worked with Asean in Myanmar in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, and then spent time in Haiti with the United Nations in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake. She will be moving to London soon to take up a Research Fellowship with the UK's leading think-tank on development and humanitarian issues, the Overseas Development Institute

Did you raise them to be change agents?

I raised them as confident young women who believe in themselves and who can release their creative powers and take on anything they like in the area that would give them the greatest satisfaction.

Lastly, with your taxing schedule, how do you chill? Do you ever wish you could just take a few weeks off and do absolutely nothing?

When I have time I swim and do yoga. I love rich conversations with friends, I love films and theatre, listening to good music and I love decorating my house and creating beautiful environments within which I can find inspiration. I'm also looking forward to my retirement in the next couple of years and to doing all the things I never had the time for. It has been a privilege to be given the opportunity in life to make a difference but I also look forward to a phase when I can spend more time in reflection. ■