



A tribute to Sheila Kitzinger

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Sheila Kitzinger with AIMS Trustee Chloe Bayfield

Sheila devoted much of her life to raising awareness about medicalised birth practices, women's rights and the emotional and spiritual transition from woman to mother.

She was enormously well-respected and influential, as can be seen from the many personal tributes in the press and on social media, since her death in April 2015.

In 2010, on the eve of the 100th International Women's Day, The Independent on Sunday published its guide to the 100 British women who, arguably, have done most to shape the world we live in today (www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/acentury-of-distinction-100-women-who-changed-the-world-1917427.htm), with Sheila included. As a childbirth activist, focused on women's rights, it was particularly apt, as it coincided with 100 years since the campaign to improve women's rights was founded.

Sheila Helena Elizabeth Kitzinger MBE was born at home in Taunton, Somerset on 29 March 1929 and died on 11 April 2015. She became a social anthropologist, specialising in pregnancy, birth and parenting. She was an honorary professor at the University of West London and Thames Valley University and frequently lectured to midwives and birth activists here and abroad, appearing on radio and television and for many years writing Sheila Kitzinger's Letter from Europe for the influential magazine, *Birth*. Perhaps most importantly she touched the lives of many women and families, supporting them personally, or through her writing to feel empowered, give 'Birth Your Way', and to heal after the devastating consequences of birth trauma. It is impossible to cover all Sheila's achievements - her books, articles and website (www.sheilakitinger.com) demonstrate the breadth and depth of these. Topics include the politics of birth, homebirth, water birth, women's experiences of sex, birth and becoming a mother and grandmother, life after birth, caring for a new baby, birth trauma, breastfeeding, midwifery,

birth in other cultures and more. She was an outspoken and effective critic of the use of routine obstetric procedures and spent her career advocating for women's right to information and decision-making - advocating for all women regardless of circumstances. We look forward to reviewing her new book, due to be published in May 2015, *A Passion for Birth: My Life - Anthropology, Family and Feminism*.

Sheila's colourful, passionate, knowledgeable and wise presence will be missed by us and by very many others.

Sheila Kitzinger's book Birth Crisis was the turning point for me in the understanding that my postnatal PTSD wasn't all my fault. Before I read her words I thought I was too sensitive, not prepared enough for the birth, couldn't cope as a new mum. Her book described what conditions need to be present to create PTSD and at the moment I read that I could let go of the shame, guilt and fear of the future, and for that I am eternally grateful.
Marie - AIMS Member

Sheila was a national treasure. Her involvement in maternity issues were so wide ranging. Just one example, those of us who decided to organise the First International Home Birth Conference invited Sheila to join the organising committee and a few years later to join the first International Waterbirth Conference committee. Her skills at media involvement were invaluable and she enthusiastically offered to approach her wide range of international contacts as we developed the programmes. These are but two examples of Sheila's activities. She was generous with her time and was always willing to be involved. She will be sorely missed Beverley

Years ago, young, and passionate about women's rights and the harms of unnecessary obstetric interventions, I wrote in response to an article by Sheila, suggesting that she had not gone far enough in her criticism of the routine use of electronic fetal monitoring. The letter was published and Sheila immediately phoned to congratulate and agree. That was her style: generosity and encouragement for those becoming involved in the politics of childbirth. Her work has been invaluable to me. I have recommended her books to countless women, knowing that they would find not only sound information, but affirmation of their feelings and experiences. Every page, no matter which book, acknowledges that childbirth and mothering are rites of passage that engage us physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially and culturally - and can be magical and deeply transformative when we have socially sensitive care that listens and empowers. Nadine

Over the years I have been involved in the politics of childbirth and women's rights, I have had the pleasure of meeting Sheila on numerous occasions. She was always inspiring, always enormously generous with her time, wisdom and supporting ear, and practically helpful to the last. Recently I met her at a Birth Crisis workshop, run by her and her equally enthusiastic daughter, Celia. Not only was the workshop packed with tools for helping women in crisis and campaigning, Sheila was keen to teach women to support others by giving space to their own journeys and by personally validating each and every experience. That personal touch, leading by example, is typical of her very much 'hands-on' approach to support. Her energy and skill will be missed far and wide, and her loss will be deeply felt by many. Vicki