

Sheila Dauer 1943-2024

Sheila Dauer, PhD, a president of IWAC at the time of her death on May 7, 2024, was a pioneer in bringing the insights of anthropology to issues of women and human rights. Over the course of a five-decade career, she reimagined human rights law through the particularizing lens of cultural diversity. Among her major achievements were her accomplishments in elevating the issue of women's rights to a status equal to that of universal and national human rights.

Sheila became interested in anthropology during her undergraduate years at Temple University and entered graduate school to continue her studies. Sheila's doctoral studies in linguistic anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania unfolded at a pivotal moment in the history of the field. Linguistics, formerly an autonomous discipline, was recast as an integrated field of anthropology, grounded in, and indivisible from, culture. Among her mentors were Erving Goffman, William Labov, and Dell Hymes, principal contributors to the emerging subfield. Sheila became part of an influential generation of young linguistic anthropologists who laid the foundation for an ethnographic approach to language. In this approach, language is understood as a sociocultural phenomenon that cannot be understood apart from its context. Within the subfield, Sheila was part of a cohort that ushered in a new line of inquiry, which they termed, "language and sex roles."

In fulfillment of their PhD degrees, and in order to pursue their interests in language as it is used in the process of speaking, Sheila and Peter went to Tanzania where they conducted fieldwork among the Bahaya people. Between 1968 and 1970, with funding from NIMH and the Ford Foundation, Sheila carried out a study of the effects of cultural and political change on the social use of language. Much of Sheila's early work can be found in the book, *See So That We*

May See: Performances and Interpretations of Traditional Tales from Tanzania, which was published in 1980, and coauthored with Peter Seitel. The couple divorced in 1973.

Sheila's fieldwork in Tanzania took place during one of the most important junctures in the nation's history. The country's prime minister, Julius Nyerere, had inaugurated a revolutionary program, known as *Ujamaa*, that promoted a new consciousness of collectivism and social equality. While living with the Haya, Sheila was able to attend women's self-help groups, where a new consciousness of gender was evolving. By observing the contrast in discursive behavior between the all-women's space and those of the household and village, Sheila formulated an argument that she would present in two very well-received works: a 1975 conference paper, and her 1984 dissertation, *Greetings in Buhaya: Negotiation of Relative Status*. The paper, "Communicative Roles for Men and Women in Buhaya," examined greeting forms as a site of gender-specific strategies. It was presented in the landmark symposium, "Language and Sex Roles," organized by Anne Farber, at the 1975 Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, in San Francisco. In a 2002 interview, Sheila summarized her argument: "Haya women have a double consciousness about their status and roles. They perceive that there are differences and inequalities in their status, and [they] ...value the very properties of their behavior and speech that are devalued by men. . . .In the presence of men they performed the accepted gender roles, [and] when together with only women, they let loose!" (Dauer interview, 2002). In 1975, the claim that men and women might view the world differently was ground-breaking. Rather than assuming culture to be a shared collective phenomenon, Sheila was proposing that gender was the basis for an intra-cultural organization of diversity. The paper drew considerable attention. According to the linguistic anthropologist Susan Phillips, "It was significant because although Tony Wallace gave us culture as shared vs.

culture as an organization of diversity, Sheila was positing gender as a fundamental society-internal organization of cultural diversity! Someone of course published something on it [later].. . . but for me this was after Sheila's paper." Neither the dissertation nor the paper was published, as Sheila moved into the NGO sector rather than remaining in academia.

The decade of the 1970s was a significant period of reflection, as women across the globe were rethinking their roles in society. During this time Sheila participated in the Ruth Benedict Collective, a group of female graduate students and faculty members in anthropology that met monthly in New York City to discuss both personal and political aspects of gender.

Always active in human rights, in 1979 Sheila joined the staff of Amnesty International-USA. She worked with AI's international research office and national sections to develop the organization's policies, actions, and publications on women's human rights. In 1988 she helped initiate the AIUSA Taskforce on Women's Human Rights and established, in 1997, AIUSA's Women's Human Rights Program. During her tenure at Amnesty, Sheila drafted *Women in the Front Line* (1991), AI's first international report on women's human rights and, from 2004 through 2008, headed up its worldwide campaign, 'Stop Violence Against Women.' She served as Director of Amnesty's Women's Human Rights Program from its inception in 2004 through 2008 when she retired. The program was ultimately absorbed into other AIUSA programs.

Upon her retirement from Amnesty International, Sheila returned to teaching, research, and writing. She taught classes in women's human rights at Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights, within the School of International and Public Affairs; at the New School for Public Engagement's Graduate Program in International Studies; and at New York University's Program in International Relations.

The latest period almost constituted a second career, this time in academia. In 2010 she organized a panel for the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association entitled, “Gender-based Violence and Human Rights.” She edited and published the papers from that meeting in the 2014 volume *Anthropological Approaches to Gender-based Violence and Human Rights, Gendered Perspectives in International Development*.

Sheila also turned her attention to NGOs concerned with women and health in the Global South. Since 2006 she has worked closely with Popular Education for Health (EPES), an organization that works to build women’s capacity for community leadership on health issues in Chile, and with its partner organization, Action for Health in the Americas (AHA). In 2010, following the earthquake in Chile, Sheila joined AHA in their visits to emergency camps and impacted communities. More recently she led a workshop on women and human rights in EPES’s Escuela Internacional and the Hope Foundation for African Women (HFAW).

At the time of her death, Sheila was a president of IWAC, the International Women’s Anthropology Conference. In this role she organized an annual IWAC panel during the annual meetings of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women.

She will be missed by the many who loved her, including her sister Jacqueline D. Baver (Dale); her nephews, Daniel Baver (Anne), Matthew Baver; her niece, Emily Baver Bowie (Chris); Cate and Una Conmy, and her many devoted friends.

1. The organization has two co-presidents.

Janet Chernela, May 15, 2025