

EIN FILM VON NICOLE SCHERG

# WISE WOMEN

FÜNF HEBAMMEN, FÜNF KULTUREN

IM KINO  
[WWW.WISEWOMEN.AT](http://WWW.WISEWOMEN.AT)

Mit GENET GEBRI, "HAIJI", AICHA EL FATMI, KANCHAN MALLA DIBESTHA, GUNDA GUTZMER, SHELIA SANTOS und anderen NICOLE SCHERG erzählt MARIA THÉRÈSE DUNTZEL, NADJA SCHWAGER und EVA HAUSBERGER, JULIANE VANI, ANJA KUMMER, ANNE-MARIE LÖNNER, JANA SIMON, ANNE-MARIE LÖNNER, KARINA RESSLER, EMILY ANTMANN, WOLFGANG WIDENHOFFER, KOSIWA KUMARAPUTRA, LUKAS LEIPERGER, JONAS ZILL, NORA CZAPLER, ANTONIA BERNDT, SELINA KENNING, MICHAEL KITZBERGER, WOLFGANG WIDENHOFFER, MARKUS GLÄSER, NIKOLAUS GEYHALTER, KATHARINA POSCH Produktion NGF GEYHALTERFILM

NGF

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FILM FUNDUS WIEN

FISA

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SCRIPT LAB

polyfilm

## **PRESS KIT**

# **WISE WOMEN**

**Five midwives, five cultures**

**A film by Nicole Scherg**

<https://wisewomen-film.com>

[https://www.geyrhalterfilm.com/en/wise\\_women](https://www.geyrhalterfilm.com/en/wise_women)

### **PRODUCTION**

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## PROTAGONISTS & CREW

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### PROTAGONISTS

Genet Gebru, "Hajja" Aïcha El Fathi, Kanchan Mala Shrestha, Gunda Gutscher, Sheila Santos, a.o.

### CREW

Director, Script	Nicole Scherg
Photography	Marie-Thérèse Zumtobel
Editing	Natalie Schwager
Sound	Eva Hausberger, Juliane Vari, Nora Czamler
Unit Manager & Research	Jona Simon
Dramaturgical advice	Karina Ressler, Emily Artmann, Wolfgang Widerhofer
Music	Coshiva
Color Grading	Lukas Lerperger
Sounddesign	Lara Zill
Sound Mixing	Nora Czamler
Production Managers	Antonia Bernkopf, Selina Nenning
Executive Producer	Michael Kitzberger
Producers	Michael Kitzberger, Wolfgang Widerhofer, Markus Glaser, Nikolaus Geyrhalter, Katharina Posch

Production: NGF - Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion GmbH

With support of Österreichisches Filminstitut, Filmfonds Wien, ORF Film/Fernseh-Abkommen, FISA Filmstandort Austria, scriptLAB drehbuchFORUM Wien

Documentary, A 2025, 88 min.

Filming locations: Austria, Brazil, Ethiopia, Morocco, Nepal

Languages: German, Brazilian Portuguese, Moroccan Arabic, Tashelhit, Nepali, Tamang, Tigrinya, Amharic





## SYNOPSIS

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"Birth doesn't stick to any shooting schedule": The director Nicole Scherg accompanies five midwives in Ethiopia, Brazil, Morocco, Nepal and Austria to create a powerful documentary about how we come to exist.

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They are the women who first laid eyes on us when we arrived: This documentary's five heroines have been present at thousands of births and are experts in the most important thing in life – helping mothers to deliver their children. The director Nicole Scherg accompanies Genet Gebru from Ethiopia, Morocco's "Hajja" Aïcha El Fathi, Kanchan Mala Shrestha from Nepal, the Austrian Gunda Gutscher and Brazil's Sheila Santos, as well as mothers who depend on them during pregnancy and childbirth.

These are challenging periods, during which women are particularly vulnerable. Having expert care and support can make all the difference. Midwives help to explain physical changes that occur, describe processes, and find ways to ensure that women can give birth the way they choose to, patiently watching over the mothers-to-be as they wait for the big moment. These professionals also understand the circumstances within which births take place: The film makes it abundantly clear that the health of women is always dependent on economic and social conditions in their surroundings. From contraception to the moment of birth itself, women's reproductive health is an intensely political issue and closely related to education. Kanchan Mala Shrestha holds sexual education classes for giggling Nepalese teenagers, Austria's Gunda Gutscher advocates for home births, and, in Brazil, Sheila Santos fits intrauterine devices (also known as coils) if women want them. How women give birth is of relevance to all of us, as all of us were once born.

Midwives are an important part of this physiological process, which is both universal and yet invariably intensely personal, whether it occurs in a high-tech operating room, in a birthing center administered by women, or in a village during a downpour. They are reliable guides from one world to another, with a deep understanding of the unpredictability of life and the resources to navigate transformational change.

Nicole Scherg worked with an all-female core team to make WISE WOMEN, including the camera operator Maria-Thérèse Zumtobel, the sound recordist Eva Hausberger, the editor Natalie Schwager, and dedicated helpers on location. After the success of the films THE FUTURE IS BETTER THAN ITS REPUTATION and LIFE ISN'T A REHEARSAL, Nicole Scherg once again creates captivating portraits of people who have devoted themselves to fundamental aspects of human life. In this case, our very beginnings on this planet.

"Birth is the most common yet most exceptional event in the world. A force of nature that pushes everyone to their limits: those giving birth, those being born, and those who are there to provide assistance," Nicole Scherg explains. The women she portrays in this moving film hold the future in their hands – metaphorically and literally.



**Did you intend WISE WOMEN to be a general reflection on the fundamental event of birth, or were you more interested in the work of a midwife?**

**NICOLE SCHERG:** At the outset, my idea was to make a film about the lowest common denominator for us human beings – something that really does unite us all. So I inevitably ended up thinking about being born. However, I wasn't only interested in the event itself but also in the unique perspective of the women who spend their lives providing support when it comes: midwives. They may experience that moment thousands of times, but each time it's different. They're very close to it, but at the same time they have to maintain a professional distance. That area of tension fascinated me.

**What prompted you to focus on such a wide geographical area? There are five protagonists in WISE WOMEN, on four continents – in North and East Africa, in Nepal, Brazil and Austria.**

**NICOLE SCHERG:** From the very beginning, I was fascinated by the idea of seeing birth as a universal experience – something that connects us all, no matter where in the world we are born. To make that visible on film, it was necessary to adopt a perspective that transcends national borders.

We're all born – and someone accompanies us at that moment. The physiological process is the same all over the world, but the circumstances in which a baby is born could hardly be more different, in terms of medical care, the political situation and the social position of the woman – which also means that of the midwife. And yet the core of midwifery remains the same. You sense that there's something which connects midwives across continents – perhaps a kind of silent knowledge about this process whereby we enter the world.

**Did you shoot the film before or after the birth of your own children?**

**NICOLE SCHERG:** In between. I already had my first child and was in the later stages of my next pregnancy while we filmed in Nepal and Ethiopia. It hadn't been planned that way, and it really messed up our shooting schedule. However, it turned out to be hugely beneficial for the film, because my being there with my big, round belly, created a very special, almost non-verbal connection to the women and the midwives. Later, when my baby was five months old, I shot the sequence in Austria. As soon as it was completed, Covid came along.

**What criteria did you use to select the protagonists across four continents?**

**NICOLE SCHERG:** I wanted to show midwives on different continents who are representative of many others. The important things were geographical diversity and the widest possible range of economic and social realities. How a birth system works depends largely on how wealthy the country is – the medical infrastructure is the factor with the greatest influence. I felt it was important to show a range of settings, from home births to birthing centers to simple hospitals and high-tech clinics. I wanted to accompany both younger and experienced midwives, women in very different phases of their lives – and to find locations with powerful contrasts: a hot country and a cold one, big cities and remote villages. Gradually, the pieces of the puzzle came together, and off we went to Ethiopia, Morocco, Brazil, Nepal and Austria.



**In Ethiopia, Morocco and Brazil you feature typical settings for giving birth, but in Austria you film a home birth, which is really unusual.**

**NICOLE SCHERG:** Gunda was the first midwife I met while I was doing my research, and I really wanted her to be in the film. The idea of showing a home birth in Austria, of all places, was something we talked about for a long time. In Austria – as in most countries around the world – hospital births are the norm. Only about 1.5% of all births take place outside a hospital setting, at home or in a birthing center. So it's an absolutely exceptional case – especially when it comes to the assistance involved. My attitude from the start was that the place where the midwife does her work didn't have to be representative of the country involved; the aim isn't to depict a statistical norm but to show how midwives shape childbirth – no matter where it takes place. Once Gunda had been chosen for the film, we felt we'd covered the subject of home birth.

**Does the fact that hospital births are the norm today also reflect a development in the field of obstetrics?**

**NICOLE SCHERG:** Home birth is obstetrics from ancient times. That's why I felt it was so important to show how it was originally. In the past, as a matter of course the midwife would come to the home of the woman giving birth; the bedroom or living room was her workplace. The establishment of obstetrics as a field of medicine, and the relocation of birth to the hospital, brought about a lot of changes. Not only did men, who in the past probably wouldn't even have thought of being involved, enter the field of obstetrics as doctors, but birth also moved to a pathological environment. As a result, the natural, physiological view of birth has increasingly faded into the background, while medical control and risk management have become more and more important.

**What did you discover about women's motivation in choosing a career as a midwife?**

**NICOLE SCHERG:** I came to the conclusion that for most midwives, the really important thing is being able to accompany women through one of the most intense and at the same time most vulnerable experiences, to protect them and give them a feeling of security. Ghenet, our midwife in Ethiopia, for example, says she never wants to see another dead mother or child. That shows very clearly what matters to all midwives: getting the mother and the child through birth safely is the top priority. A midwife needs a powerful sense of idealism to handle all the hardship, the responsibility and the stress of this profession. Despite all the beautiful moments, it is a tough job that demands a lot from women. This creates a kind of complicity between midwife and mother – and it is precisely this closeness that makes them the original feminists, in my view, even if they would probably never use that term. They stand by the side of women, fight for self-determination and for a birth that is not only safe but also humane.

**In narrative terms, you first provide an account of the work, everyday life and routine involved in being a midwife, but you also show times when babies can't be brought to life, and you observe what effect this has on the midwives.**

**NICOLE SCHERG:** It's in the nature of things that most births go well – and some don't. So while we were filming, we inevitably encountered times when it wasn't possible for the baby to be born. These moments show not only how much responsibility midwives have, but also that you can never predict how a birth will go. Midwives must be extremely vigilant at all times and able to do the right thing in this stressful situation. We simply followed events with the camera and then constructed the narrative in the editing.

We chose scenes where something is revealed to us, and the audience can become involved emotionally.

**Another interesting feature of the film is the way all the protagonists share their own experiences with pregnancy and family.**

**NICOLE SCHERG:** I wanted to show my protagonists not only in their working world but as complete individuals. It really wasn't until we were filming that I heard the stories behind their professional lives as midwives. Before that, we had only met over video calls, where we talked for two or three hours, together with a translator. Birth, motherhood and children are subjects that almost inevitably arise when you talk to midwives. Sheila in Brazil said she'd have liked children of her own but couldn't have any. Her job means that she experiences the emotions of the families and is part of these special moments. Every woman has her own story.

Interview: Karin Schiefer | AUSTRIAN FILMS

Translation: Charles Osborne



## Nicole Scherg | Director | BIOGRAPHY & FILMOGRAPHY

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Nicole Scherg, born in 1976 in Würzburg, grew up in a small village in the Spessart region. She studied documentary filmmaking with a focus on directing and script development at ZeLIG – School for Documentary in Bolzano. Since 2005, she has been living and working in Vienna.

Today, her work centers on directing and creating feature-length documentaries. She has also collaborated on numerous international productions – including with NGF Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion – gaining extensive experience in the dramaturgical and narrative development of documentary projects. Her particular interest lies in cinematic approaches that illuminate social, personal, and existential questions in all their complexity, with an empathetic and finely attuned perspective. In her films, she combines documentary precision with a close, immersive connection to the people she portrays.



Best Documentary – NYU Next Reel, New York (USA)

### FILMOGRAPHY – Nicole Scherg

#### **WISE WOMEN**

Director, Writer | Feature Documentary, 88 min | 2025

#### **THE FUTURE IS BETTER THAN ITS REPUTATION (Die Zukunft ist besser als ihr Ruf)**

Director (with Teresa Distelberger, Niko Mayr and Gabi Schweiger) | Feature Documentary, 85 min | 2017

*Award:*  
Romy Award 2018 – Best Documentary (Theatrical Release)

#### **LIFE ISN'T A REHEARSAL (Das Leben ist keine Generalprobe)**

Director, Writer, Cinematography | Feature Documentary, 90 min | 2016

#### **GRANDPARENTS (Großeltern)**

Director, Writer | Documentary, 35 min | 2004

*Awards:*  
Special Mention for “Emotional Truth” – 11th International Film Festival Etudia, Krakow (Poland)  
Special Prize of the Jury – Cronograf, Chisinau (Moldova)  
Best Documentary – Euganea Movie Movement, Padua (Italy)

**GENET – Adi Gudem, Ethiopia**

Name: Genet Gebru | Age: 26 | Place of birth: (no information) | Place of residence: Adi Gudem  
Marital status: Married | Children: One Son (Jonathan) | Workplace: AdiGudem Primary Hospital



*I chose midwifery because I feel it's my calling to care for mothers and their newborns. My mother said: "You study childbirth?" I told her: "I don't want to see another dead mother." She said: "If this is what you want, good. But it can be a stressful job." I told her she doesn't need to worry. This work brings me happiness. It's worth all the challenges that come with it.*

*As a midwife, I advocate for mothers to receive all the care they need.*

### KANCHAN - Rautbesi, Nepal

Name: Kanchan Mala Shrestha | Age: 45 | Place of birth: Bhutan (grew up and attended school in India; parents are Nepalese) | Place of residence: Rautbesi, Nepal | Marital status: Married (Husband was still alive during filming) | Children: Three (two daughters, one son) | Workplace: Rautbesi Health Post



*People now understand that women also have to study. I don't know if it's because they saw me, but they have started sending their daughters to school. Now there are girls in our village who have graduated.*

*Of course, my work has affected my family. I say that you should breastfeed your babies for two years. I say this to every mother. But I didn't do it myself. I had to go to work and leave my children alone for days, with my husband. My kids missed out on a lot of things. It affected them.*



## HAJJA – Casablanca, Morocco

Name: „Hajja“ Aïcha El Fathi | Age: 73 | Place of birth: Agadir, Marokko | Place of residence: Casablanca | Marital status: Widowed (husband passed away 20 years ago) | Children: Three (two sons, one daughter) | Workplace: Maison de Naissance Tissir, Casablanca (founded by her)



*You can never tell in advance if a birth will go smoothly. Even if everything seems fine, it can change at any moment. In those moments of waiting, you forget the entire world. You only see the woman who will give birth. The baby has to be born. This is the most important thing.*

*You need to stay close. It's about being available. I always said that if I open a birth center, I'll need to live there or nearby. It's impossible to work in a birth center and to live far away. There's rain, there's cold. If you come by car, you can have an accident and not arrive in time to help. But the woman was depending on you. Women rely on you like on a midwife in a village. Someone close by and available quickly.*

*I'm a believer. I don't fear death. I'm afraid that I'll have a heart attack and there'll be no one to help the woman give birth.*

## GUNDA – Neulengbach, Austria

Name: Gunda Gutscher | Age: 57 | Place of birth: Home birth, approx. 8 km from current place of residence | Place of residence: Inprugg, Austria | Marital status: Married | Children: Three (two sons, one daughter) | Workplace: Home birth midwife (Neulengbach area)



*What makes my work so important to me: Offering women the support they need to find their own way, to approach this mystery according to their own rhythm and in accordance with their own wishes. And how wonderful it is when it all works out, and you can establish and enjoy a different relationship with your child. The relationship between mother and child affects a person's entire life.*

*During birth, you move between different worlds. It is probably similar to the end of life. It is something so natural and normal. Yet also something very special and deeply personal.*

*When I do home births as a midwife, my approach is that birth is a natural physiological process in a woman's life that essentially works. As a midwife, my position is that, when a woman becomes pregnant and the pregnancy proceeds normally, she should be able to give birth without any additional aids, I don't need to improve anything, I don't need to measure anything. It will simply happen.*

*In Austria, the home birth rate is below 2%. This means that very few women experience a home birth, and have the luxury of having a midwife for themselves. A person they see regularly during pregnancy, whom they know well and trust. Studies show that a one-to-one care would be a very effective way to improve the process of giving birth.*

*When a woman goes to hospital, she essentially has to apply for entry. She has to follow the house rules. When we go to a woman, it's the other way around. Something changes in the hierarchy and in the relationship.*

*We women have to live with the fact that we are not trusted and people believe we can't manage. And that is actually what midwives can teach women: You can do it! You're pregnant, you will give birth to your child. You will take good care of your child, you will be a good mother. You're exactly the right person for this child, and you belong together.*

### SHEILA – Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Name: Sheila Santos | Age: 55 | Place of birth: Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro | Place of residence: Vila Valqueire, Rio de Janeiro | Marital status: Married | Children: None | Workplaces: Casa de Parto David Capistrano (Birth Center), Hospital Maternidade Leila Diniz



*Our work in the maternity ward is always about life. A life arrives, and when that life goes, it's very difficult. If a baby is born prematurely, we fight to help it to survive. It's here because it was born prematurely, but it wants to live. And then you help it to get what it wants, which is life. When you can't fulfill that, it's very difficult. You experience a great loss. You think you are prepared for it, but you are not.*

*You're welcoming a life. And that is your responsibility, because you accompany woman and child on their journey to birth.*

*We can't say when it's going to happen. We just have to wait. Encourage the woman to believe she can do it. That she has the strength and the power to receive this child in a healthy way. The way she wants. That's what I try to pass on to her. That she can understand her body, understand her own movement. That she has the power to receive this child. That's my role, to support her.*

## LINKS

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WHO

<https://www.who.int/health-topics/women-s-health>

The State of the World's Midwifery 2021 -im Moment die aktuellste Studie)

[https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/sowmy\\_2021](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/sowmy_2021)

ICM

<https://internationalmidwives.org/>

International MotherBaby Childbirth Organization

<https://www.imbco.org/>



NGF Geyrhalterfilm is an award-winning production company from Vienna with over 20 years of experience and 100 films produced so far (documentaries, feature films and documentary series for cinema and TV/streaming).

Our films have received over 200 awards (including European Film Awards) and have been screened in competitions at all major A-list festivals (Cannes, Berlinale, San Sebastian, Amsterdam, Toronto, Sundance, ...) among others. They are financed and internationally co-produced with partners, film funds and TV stations from many different countries and distributed by renowned sales worldwide.

The range of form and content goes from radical arthouse to box office hitting family entertainment – all our films are committed to local engagement and the big global questions.

<https://www.geyrhalterfilm.com>





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