"We have had abortions"

These 53 American women invite you to join them in a campaign for honesty and freedom.

Last year, 343 prominent and respected Frenchwomen were willing to sign a public manifesto declaring that they had undergone abortions. This acte de révolte dramatized their individual determination to take their lives and liberation into their own hands. It also showed their willingness to stand with and to speak for their less well-known sisters, who were forced to suffer unwanted pregnancies or illegal abortions in silence.

To many American women and men it seems absurd, in this allegedly enlightened age, that we should still be arguing for a simple principle: that a woman has the right to sovereignty over her own body. Still, there are tragically few places in the country where a woman can obtain an abortion without the expense and deception of conforming to inhuman laws, or the expense and physical danger of going outside the law. (Organizations offering information on the laws and on abortion availability are listed on page 126 of this issue.) The vast majority of abortion laws in this country are remnants of obscurantist attitudes and medieval prejudices.

In fact, at least one of every four women in the United States has had an abortion. Until the recent legal reform in two states, all of those had to be either therapeutic or illegal. Given the difficulty of securing a therapeutic abortion, the great majority of abortions endured by American women have been illegal—and therefore dangerous. This has caused untold suffering, especially on the part of poor women who must resort to self-induced or butchered abortions. Some idea of the lives to be saved by repealing abortion laws is suggested by the recent drastic reduction in deaths from childbirth, a statistic that includes deaths from bungled abortions, in New York City alone. During the first nine months of the new legal abortion program, “deaths from childbirth” dropped by at least 60 per cent.

To save lives and to spare other women the pain of socially-imposed guilt, 53 respected women residents in the United States have volunteered to begin the American Women’s Petition by signing the statement below. Our purpose is not to alienate or to ask for sympathy, but to re-establish and inhuman laws. Because of the social stigma still wrongly attached to abortion, many women in public life, or with husbands in public life, have felt unable to join us. We are mostly women active in community work, or in the arts. But we invite all women, from every walk of life, to help eliminate this stigma by joining us in this petition, and signing the statement below. The complete list will be sent to the White House, to every State Legislature, and to our sisters in other countries who are signing similar petitions for their lawmakers.

Barbaralee D. Diamonstein

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The attitudes and laws against abortion in this country are causing untold suffering. Approximately one million American women had “illegal” abortions in 1971—many of them self-induced or performed by the unqualified, some of them fatal.

I have had an abortion. I publicly join millions of other American women in demanding a repeal of all laws that restrict our reproductive freedom.

Name: ____________________________
Address: __________________________
Identification: ______________________

Send to: American Women’s Petition, “Ms,” 370 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

Eve Auchincloss
Sunny Aurelio
Lorraine Beebe
Joan Bingham
Patricia Bosworth
Kay Boyle
Adelyn D. Breeskin
Susan Brownmiller
Hortense Calisher
Jaqueline Michot Ceballos
Lucinda Cisler
Shirley Clarke
Judy Collins
Mary Cunningham
Anselma Dell’Olio
Karen De Crow
Barbaralee D. Diamonstein
Susan Edmiston
Nora Ephron
Lee Grant
Gael Greene
Nancy Grossman
Barbara Barrie Harnick
Lillian Hellman
Dorothy Pitman Hughes
Elizabeth Janeway
Lucy Jarvis
Jill Johnston
Billie Jean King
Maxine Kumin
Irma Lazarus
Viveca Lindfors
Marya Mannes
Dorothea Millstone
Marcia Colman Morton
Anais Nin
Gracie Paley
Beverly Pepper
Eleanor Perry
Frances Fox Piven
Letty Cottin Pogrebin
Mary Rodgers
Naomi Ellen Rabin
Nora Sayre
Antiu Siegel
Marcia B. Siegel
Anne Sexton
Ruth P. Smith
Susan Sontag
Gloria Steinem
Leni Tabori
Barbara W. Tuchman
Shirley Ann Wheeler

Barbaralee Diamonstein is a freelance writer who was Director of Cultural Affairs for New York City. Her book of interviews with 94 women, "Open Secrets," will be published in February.