

# PETITION SANNITY

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*Editors' Note: This petition for freedom of sexual choice was prepared with the help of Kathleen Peratis, Director of the Women's Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union; Jean O'Leary, board member of the National Gay Task Force and former chairwoman of Lesbian Feminist Liberation; Dolores Alexander, former executive director of the National Organization for Women; and Ivy Bottini, former board member of NOW and Consciousness-Raising Organizer for its Los Angeles chapter. The project was coordinated by Elissa Krauss and Gloria Steinem of the "Ms." staff. We especially wish to thank Jan Crawford, convenor of the New York City Feminist Community Coalition, who suggested this petition; Jean O'Leary, who was most responsible for making it a reality; and all those women who may wish to join us in this effort.*

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**W**e, the undersigned, wish to state publicly our opposition to an archaic practice that is still alive in this country: the attempt by government to interfere in the sexual lives of consenting adults, and the failure by government to protect the civil rights of people who suffer such interference from others.

We believe all people to have common cause in eliminating this practice. Though laws and regulations governing private sexual behavior tend to be selectively enforced against lesbians and male homosexuals—particularly from poor, minority, and politically unpopular groups—they potentially affect every person, regardless of personal power or sexual orientation. Not only do these laws and regulations leave privacy and individual freedom to the whim of employers and legislators, landlords and judges, but their enforcement results in a tragic waste of human talent. Even when not enforced, their existence serves to inhibit the free choice of lifestyle.

Therefore, we urge every person, regardless of race, age, class, sex, or sexual orientation, to join us in establishing this fundamental right to privacy and individual freedom.

As feminists, we sign this petition for one additional reason. In the history of women's struggle for self-determination, it has been a painful fact that almost any woman who did not choose to play a traditional or sec-

ondary role might find herself labeled a lesbian, and restricted in her efforts for fear of the effects of that label. Indeed, even the Women's Movement itself has sometimes been divided and weakened by this fear. Therefore, we must unite on the issue of *all* women's right to a free choice of lifestyle, regardless of sexual orientation. Only when the word *lesbian* has lost its power to intimidate and oppress, when it is as positive as other human choices, can each individual woman be fearless and free.

As women and as feminists, we pledge to work toward the following goals which we believe will benefit all citizens:

1. The repeal of all regulations and the elimination of institutional practices that limit access to employment, housing, public accommodations, credit, government or military service and child custody because of sexual orientation.
  2. The repeal of all laws that make sexual acts between consenting adults criminal.
  3. The passage of legislation that will guarantee each individual's rights, regardless of sexual orientation, so that those who suffer discrimination for that reason will have the same access to redress as do the victims of discrimination because of race, sex, religion, or national origin.
  4. The creation of a social climate in which lifestyles may be freely chosen.
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supersedes the male-female distinctions.

Zuni Indian women are adept at another form of "masculine" conduct: physical combat. It is not unusual for two women competing for the same lover to confront each other on the village plaza and to settle their dispute by a vicious and prolonged fistfight. Zuni men, on the other hand, do not deal with their love problems in any physical or violent manner.

Continents away from the American Indians, the Mundugumor of New Guinea also accept physical aggressiveness in the female. Men and women are considered equally violent and vicious, and a wife never submits passively to a husband's insults and blows. In fact, a husband who wishes to beat his wife is careful enough to arm himself beforehand with a crocodile jaw.

Two New Guinean cultures that illustrate diverse views of what is "normal" male behavior are the Arapesh and the Tchambuli, both of which are extensively discussed in *Sex and Temperament*. Arapesh men and women are taught to be both gentle and unaggressive, and also to shy away from leadership roles in society. Authoritarian behavior is antithetical to their quiet habits. Those who must lead—the "big men" who serve as symbolic leaders of the culture—are required to put on a show of arrogance, flaunting, aggressive speechmaking, and stamping about. But the men consider this performance more theatrical than real. They do not enjoy the posturing and tend to view it as a distasteful obligation.

The Arapesh man's nonaggressiveness is also apparent in his attitude toward sex, which he considers a serious matter strictly associated with marriage. He never displays active sexuality or recognizes that sex can be a source of physical satisfaction. The concept of rape is utterly foreign to him, and he would not understand the notion of "male lust" or "male needs." Sexual passion is considered dangerous and is usually repressed.

Tchambuli men express themselves in a somewhat frivolous and vain manner, dressing in elaborate ceremonial costumes and curling their hair. The Tchambuli male devotes his life to art and ceremony while the female assumes the responsibility for gardening, fishing, and controlling the economy.

Tchambuli men have a somewhat careless attitude toward community business. Women do allow men to do the market shopping and to trade mosquito nets, their most valuable commodity, but these errands in-

evitably turn into an occasion for the men to dress in feathers and shells and go off for a few days as if on a holiday. When the men return from the market, they cannot spend the profits without their wives' consent. Property is something only a woman can give them, and only in return for "languishing looks and soft words."

In our society the Arapesh male would be considered peculiarly effeminate, the Tchambuli male eccentric. But individuals whose psychosexuality is more obviously ambiguous would pose even more of a threat to us.

Whatever their concept of "normal" male or female behavior, societies that are less rigid about sexual distinctions and thus more tolerant of sexual variability among people, not only recognize these "different" individuals in a social sense but fit them into their cultural pattern.

Among the American Navaho and the Bala (of the African Congo) are men who adopt female clothing and mannerisms for the express purpose of escaping their male responsibilities. The Bala call such a man a *kitesha* (plural, *bitesha*), and the Navaho refer to him as a *nadle*. To us he is a transvestite. The Bala speak of their *bitesha* as men "who act like women," although only a few are homosexual, and most *bitesha* are not very comfortable with non*bitesha* men. *Bitesha* explain their role as a means of freeing themselves from the demands and expectations of others. *Bitesha* wear female attire and wiggle their hips as they walk. If they do any work at all, it is usually light work: they do like gathering food and looking after children, both of which are considered female duties. In every other respect male *bitesha* claim they are like ordinary Bala men, equal to them in physical strength and sexual capacity. Many marry. One has been known to marry a female *kitesha*.

Female *bitesha* are far fewer in number. Evidently they prefer women to men for companionship, although they do enjoy sexual relations with male *bitesha*. Unlike the men, female *bitesha* wear the clothing of their sex. What male and female *bitesha* have in common, then, is their distaste for work. Female *bitesha* dislike cooking and prefer food-gathering, because it is the easier labor. The *bitesha* adamantly refuse to consider their behavior shameful or wrong, and mainstream Bala society puts up with the *bitesha* though they are clearly viewed as deviants.

The Navaho have a much more tolerant attitude toward their *nadles*, who play prominent roles in the society. Because a *nadle* is equally versatile in "female" and "male" skills, he may profit (*continued on page 94*)

For the still life at left, photographer Niki Ekstrom placed an Ashanti Akua-ba doll against a background of other elements important to the lives of women in agricultural Africa.



THIS STATEMENT AND ITS LIST OF SIGNERS WILL  
BE SENT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS, STATE LEGISLATURES,  
AND THE WHITE HOUSE; TO NATIONAL GROUPS  
ALREADY FIGHTING FOR SUCH CHANGES; AND TO WOMEN'S GROUPS  
IN OTHER COUNTRIES THAT MAY BE ORGANIZING SIMILAR  
CAMPAIGNS. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO BE INCLUDED, PLEASE FILL IN THE  
SPACE BELOW AND SEND TO WOMEN'S PETITION FOR SANITY,  
Ms. MAGAZINE, 370 LEXINGTON AVENUE, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10017.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Occupation/Organization: \_\_\_\_\_  
(please print)  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

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Legal Defense and Education Fund  
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\*Organizations listed for identification  
purposes only.