

Spare Rib

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Spare Rib, the Women's Liberation magazine, is in many ways unique among magazines for women. Its motives for production are utterly non-commercial; after four years it still faces debts, and no prospect of fat wages for any of its participants. It is put together, not by an editorial hierarchy, but by a collective of six committed women on equal terms. Its function is not merely to provide reading matter, but also to act as a notice-board putting groups and individuals in touch with each other and conveying news of the movement, suggesting ideas or actions and promoting practical self-help. Whereas other magazines offer to women leading drab or unfulfilled lives the palliative escapism of fantasy gratification, *Spare Rib* strives actually to improve or ameliorate the very conditions which make many women's lives bleak, by facing and then fighting them. It is a magazine with a mission, not mercenary.

Spare Rib emerged from the underground press (*Time Out*, *Oz* etc.) in 1972, started by women from these papers who 'still found they were always making the tea'. The underground press (in particular *Ink* now itself defunct) generously loaned money to finance the enterprise. There were then many scattered women's liberation groups, but with little contact; and women's workshop literature was not stocked on public bookstalls. A need was felt for a central magazine, publicly available, which would cater for women's repression and form a link between groups. In the face of huge costs, minimal encouragement and collapsing magazines around, Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott contrived to get *Spare Rib* established (and with howsplendid a title) so that it has now reached its 36th monthly issue and seems here to stay. Its circulation is around 22,000 (barely more than that of the National Housewives Register's *Newsletter*) a tenth of which is by subscription; half the sales are in London, good sales in Wales, Liverpool and Birmingham; but there is presumably a potential, geographically dissipated market which the magazine does not reach for reasons of financial stringency. They cannot afford either to pay for much-needed publicity, or to print a surplus to distribute to ensure that copies are available wherever required. Sometimes too booksellers take exception to particular items or issues, and refuse to stock them. (Have you tried to buy a copy locally? Any success?) Whereas most magazines are restricted to a specific age-group, the readership of *Spare Rib* extends across the adult span; at an unavoidable 30p a copy, the readership now is predominantly middle-class—a matter of concern to the collective, that the magazine is not reaching those in greatest need of it.

The topics covered by *Spare Rib* are deeply serious. There are many articles on aspects of sexuality; gynaecological problems, sterilization, abortion, lesbianism, masturbation; women in industry—their working conditions, strikes, unions, Working Women's Charter; law and economics as they affect women; a NEWS central section; reports of international treatment of women and women's movements abroad; individual feminists' experiences—ex-suffragettes, Angela Davis, Jane Fonda; women's true stories; women's particular grim problems—wife battering, rape, prostitution, schizophrenia. There have been pages of practical advice on lighting, photography, health exercises, self-defence; readers' problems answered by Anna Raeburn. The arts are extensively covered, with women's theatre, artists and sculptors, book reviews, and always a great deal on women's folk or rock music. Children are often considered; in communes, in Inner London schools; child minders; children's rights; particularly, early sexual stereotyping. Children's books are extensively and rigorously examined in terms of sexism. There are short stories and fiction extracts from feminist viewpoints; occasional guest articles by leading campaigners such as Germaine Greer.

Readers' letters form a large part of the magazine, exchanging views, experiences, problems and suggested action. A classified ads. section gives addresses of homosexual and action groups, individual appeals for associates and help of various types. Editorials are a new feature, to be written by members of the collective in turn. Information pages give notices of events, campaigns, projects, services, pamphlets—the real notice board function of the magazine.

There is complete frankness, both verbal and photographic, in the treatment of all topics; which may lead to censorship at the bookstalls and financial disaster. *Spare Rib* also exercises its own censorship; no advertisements are accepted which portray women as sexual objects. (Vibrators are advertised.)

The lack of colour in cover pictures is determined by a blend of aesthetic and financial factors. Despite early, disastrous insistence by distributors on expensive, glossy covers, *Spare Rib* now lies devoid of false glamour, starkly black and white on the bookstalls; its candid pictures of octogenarian feminist Gwen Coleman, of Angela Davis, of women in stress (leaving prison, in a battered wives' shelter), glare there like a true deed in a tinsel world.

Perhaps *Spare Rib* limits its appeal by linking women's liberation ineluctably with other causes. Six demands are stated in a recent editorial; equal pay, education and job opportunities; legal and financial independence; free contraception, abortion and nurseries; and an end to discrimination against lesbians. Somewhere down this list, may they not lose some original supporters? Socialism is seen as an integral part of feminism; equality must be for all, not sexual only. A conservative, intolerantly heterosexual feminist would be seen as a contradiction in terms.

Marsha Rowe sees the main achievements of the last four years as an increase in professional competence and seriousness in selection and research; and having brought women's liberation out into the open, seriously considered, and installed on the news-stands. This is a crucial point; to quote an editorial, "We are confronting the media image of women's liberation, of bra-burning and test tube babies, on its own ground. We are fighting the media with media of our own."

Even the last NHR Newsletter was guilty of joining the patronization and misrepresentation of women's liberation, with the stale cliché of the "Grey-faced, shrill-voiced, bra-burning etc. cohorts of women's liberation". In sheer contrast to this ubiquitous gibe, Marsha Rowe herself is one of the genuinely nicest people, of the greatest warmth, sincerity and integrity, that I have met; totally dedicated to the magazine.

In the interest of truth, to see through the derisive distortions of popular misrepresentation of the movement, simply look at *Spare Rib*. It represents Women's Liberation seriously, compassionately and honestly.

This article appeared in the National Housewives Register's *Newsletter* no. 19, Autumn 1975, pages 10-11.