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## 'Tough times' ahead for women

"The women's movement is being misrepresented and used against itself," according to Brooklyn College history professor Renate Bridenthal.

Speaking before the CUNY Feminist Network Conference at the Graduate Center Nov. 12, she warned that this is one of several factors that threaten to slow its progress.

A whole generation of young women is in danger of reacting against the false image of the movement being put forth by the media, said Prof. Bridenthal. That image presents as the feminist goal, the superwoman who can do everything — job, marriage, childraising — with relative ease.

"The women's movement as I saw it never said that," protested Prof. Bridenthal, who was a founder of the CUNY Women's Coalition. "We have been saying that we need such things as day care so that a woman can realize her goals. Not that she should kill herself under existing conditions without a good infrastructure for support."

Prof. Bridenthal also fears the effect of the current economic slump on the women's movement.

"There's not too much out there and there's an awful lot of competition for it," she said, referring to the bleak employment picture. "People are apt to say, as they did in the Depression, that women have taken men's jobs."

"Then they ask who is taking care of the children, the aged, and the ill —

whom the government says it can no longer assist."

These pressures have created a backlash that depicts the movement as something undesirable and anti-social, Prof. Bridenthal told her audience. "It's as if we were to blame for all the ills the recession has dumped on us and it's very frightening."

She sees a real threat that the burden of caring for those whom the government has abandoned will fall on women, forcing them back into an existence circumscribed by the home.

Women are also being blamed for destroying the family, says Prof. Bridenthal. But it is necessary to ask what is meant by family, she cautions. "Those who make this charge don't see the woman as an equal member with a life of her own and needs of her own. I sometimes think that 'family' is a code word for a woman in the home."

A specialist on Weimar Germany, she finds certain parallels in this country today that disturb her: a depressed economy, the drying up of aid to the needy, the desire for a strong person to solve seemingly insoluble problems, attempts to curtail women's reproductive rights, and what she calls "the bombast about family life." She notes also the devaluing of humanistic education and, with it, women's studies.

Nevertheless, women's studies, though still battling for recognition in some quarters, have made significant progress,

she feels. In her own field she points to the inclusion of feminist contributions in history texts by even some of the most tradition-bound members of the profession.

The whole notion of looking into the gender experience is transforming scholarship, she says. A case in point: researchers in compiling data now realize that developments in social policy affect men and women differently, and their findings have begun to take this difference into account.

Both she and those attending the feminist conference last semester stressed the importance of networking at CUNY and elsewhere. A series of workshop sessions considered strategies and specific courses of action for various disciplines.

In spite of what she sees as "some very tough times ahead" for the women's movement, Prof. Bridenthal is optimistic, because, as she says, "The demands are there and will continue to be voiced."

For Renate Bridenthal, feminism is a coming-to-consciousness, an ongoing process that is both individual and social, and something that has constantly to be reworked and rethought.

Her own awakening was not the result of any single event that shook her into awareness, she reports. Instead, it was a gradual realization that she wasn't quite being treated as an equal, the way she thought a man might be treated.

Until then she was what she calls a



Renate Bridenthal

"queen bee" — a woman who has made it in a man's world. Other women had somehow flunked out, she thought. But that was before consciousness-raising took hold and catapulted her into the women's movement.

Since then she has become increasingly committed to the movement and has devoted a major part of her academic career to women's studies. At Brooklyn College, where women's studies is offered as a collateral major, she regularly teaches courses ranging from the introductory level through the senior seminar.

She is a co-author (with Claudia Koonz) of a college text, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, and has written a chapter in *Household and Kin: Families in Flux*. She is currently working on *Their Own Drummer: Women Who Marched Toward Hitler*, to be published by Oxford University Press, and was recently awarded a \$25,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which will enable her to continue her work on the book next year.

— C.S.