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5530 Linda Lane, Carmichael, CA, telephone: 489-8650. Call with news or comments.

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Guest Column: Slow Progress for Women in Capitol Press

By Sigrid Bathen

Sigrid Bathen is a former Sacramento Bee reporter who teaches journalism at California State University, Sacramento. She was a founder of the Bee Women's Caucus and first president of Sacramento Women in Media in the 1970s. This article is excerpted from an August 1992 article in California Republic Magazine, and based on Bathen's CSUS Master's thesis, "The Girls on the Bus: Women Reporters in the Capitol Press Corps."

Susan Sward was a 23-year-old reporter with a Stanford B.A. in Psychology, a master's in Journalism from UCLA and a Los Angeles Times internship behind her when she became one of the first women ever to cover the California Capitol in 1971. Now with the San Francisco Chronicle, she still vividly recalls that first day when she was assigned by Associated Press to the state Assembly beat: "My first day on the floor, [Assemblyman] Bill Bagley came and kissed my hand and arm on bended knee in front of my AP seat on the edge of the floor. Willie Brown came over and asked if I would coauthor his consenting adults bill."

More amused than offended, Sward merely went about her business, covering state government and politics, often feeling very young—and very alone. "That was partly a function of being 23 and unsure of myself generally when I arrived in Sacramento," she says. "But it was also a function of the intense maleness of the place. And while I didn't mind Brown's consenting adults joke, for example, I did get sick of the day-in-day-out male bonding aspect of the place—the locker room flavor of jokes and friendships and the way it flavored how the politics got done too.... Bit by bit that changed, as more women came into the Legislature, the press corps and on staff."

When Sward came to Sacramento in 1971, she says that among 60-some accredited reporters, there were, at most, three female reporters covering the Capitol. Minority reporters, male or female, were nonexistent.

Today, among the approximately 84 accredited reporters who regularly cover the state Capitol, 12 are women, down from a high of about 17 in the mid-1980s. Minorities fare even worse, with only three minority reporters or editors: two Hispanic and one black, in the entire Capitol Press Corps.

The very first woman reporter to cover the California Capitol was Mary Ellen Leary of the old San Francisco News—who was sent to Sacramento in 1943 when many male reporters were assigned to World War II. Although the numbers of women have increased somewhat since the 1960s and early 1970s, few women have shattered the so-called "glass ceiling" and become bureau chiefs or, like the Bee's Amy Chance, deputy bureau chiefs. Chance, who covered the presidential campaign of Bill Clinton in 1992, says politics and political reporting continue to be dominated by "a white male climate.... Women are still not accepted as a matter of course in politics. It's a big deal that two women were running for the U.S. Senate."

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Although the more egregious forms of sexual harassment experienced by women reporters in the 1960s and 1970s at the Capitol have declined (including tales such as the remark of a notoriously sexist politician, now dead, who said that a women reporter "looked like she had visited 'a gynecologist with cold fingers'"), women reporters covering the Capitol say sexism remains. "I don't think it's always overt," says the Bee's Kathleen Z. McKenna, "but there is an undercurrent that is always there."

Deborah Pacyna, Capitol correspondent for Sacramento's KXTV and the first woman president of the Sacramento Press Club, says the Capitol remains in many ways "a good old boys network. I go into press conferences, and there is a sea of male faces. Still."▲

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