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BY STORID BATHEN

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No matter that political campaigns have recently been focusing more on women's issues—it's still mostly men who cover them.

The Girls on the Bus

Susan Sward was a 23-year-old reporter with a Stanford bachelor's in psychology, a master's in journalism from UCLA and a prestigious *Los Angeles Times* internship behind her when she became one of the first women ever to cover the California State Capitol in 1971. She still vividly recalls that first day when she was assigned by the

Associated Press to cover the California Assembly. "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."

"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... Bit by bit, that changed, as more women came into the Legislature, the press corps and on staff."

When Sward came to town in 1971, she says that among the 60-some accredited reporters, there were, at most, three female reporters covering the Capitol. Minority reporters were nonexistent. In the Legislature itself, she says, there were only three women in the state Assembly, none in the Senate, and "very few" female legislative staff.

"The basic female presence was secretaries," she says. "The women around seemed like ornaments, not real players."

Although the very first woman reporter to cover the California Capitol was Mary Ellen Leary of the old *San Francisco News*—sent to Sacramento in 1943 when many male reporters were "assigned" to World War II—only a handful of women reporters entered the staunchly all-male domain of Capitol coverage in the intervening years.

In the 1960s and early 1970s—as the women's rights movement gained momentum and women reporters traditionally consigned to covering so-called "women's page" news were allowed (though not necessarily encouraged) to do general-assignment and cityside reporting—more women began the slow trek toward the "prestige" assignments such as covering the state Capitol. Women like the AP's Sward, now with the *The San Francisco Chronicle*, the late Nancy Skelton of *The Sacramento Bee* and the *Los Angeles Times*; Karen Stanely for KCBS Radio and the AP's Edie

Lederer, now a foreign correspondent for the AP in Europe.

The numbers have increased somewhat since then, and most major news organizations with any significant presence in the Capitol include women reporters, although the total number (11 out of approximately 80) remains wildly underrepresentative. Some women, like UPI's Rebecca LaVally (now an editor with the Senate Office of Research), cracked the "glass ceiling" and become bureau chiefs or, like *The Bee's* Amy Chance, deputy bureau chiefs.

And women are covering campaigns in increasing numbers. "There are so many women on the campaign trail," said Chance in an interview during the 1990 gubernatorial campaign, which she covered for *The Bee*. "we joke that we don't go drinking, we go shopping."

While she was covering the presidential campaign of Bill Clinton, Chance said politics—and political reporting—continued to be dominated by "a white male climate. Women are still not accepted as a matter of course in politics."

The Capitol Press Corps is a powerful, prestigious assignment covered by California reporters, and it is one of the profession's most intensely competitive, as well as one of its most clannish. Citing its macho, clubby nature, many women

political reporters liken their profession to sports reporting. Once a reporter, usually a white male, is admitted to this small but influential fraternity, he often stays for years, and turnover is glacial.

"Opportunities are really limited in this business," says longtime *Los Angeles Times* political reporter George Skelton. "A lot of it is breaks, and a lot of it is talent. And there are only so many jobs."

Many Sacramento bureaus are one- and two-person operations, where opportunities for new blood are especially slim. But turnover is also slow in the larger bureaus.

"It may just be chance and coincidence," says the AP's Jennifer Kerr, who has covered the Capitol since 1978, "but at the larger bureaus, there appears to be this conscious decision to just have one woman reporter."

Doug Willis, longtime AP Sacramento correspondent and president of the Capitol Correspondents Association, says there are approximately 80 accredited reporters who regularly cover the Capitol for general-circulation publications. That number includes only 11 women (down from a high of about 17 in the mid-1980s). The largest number of women reporters is at *The Bee*, where there are four women in the 11-member bureau, including Chance, Capitol News

Editor Eli Shaw and two reporters, Kathy Smith and Pam Podger, who cover the Capitol for *The Sacramento Bee's* sister papers in Modesto and Fresno.

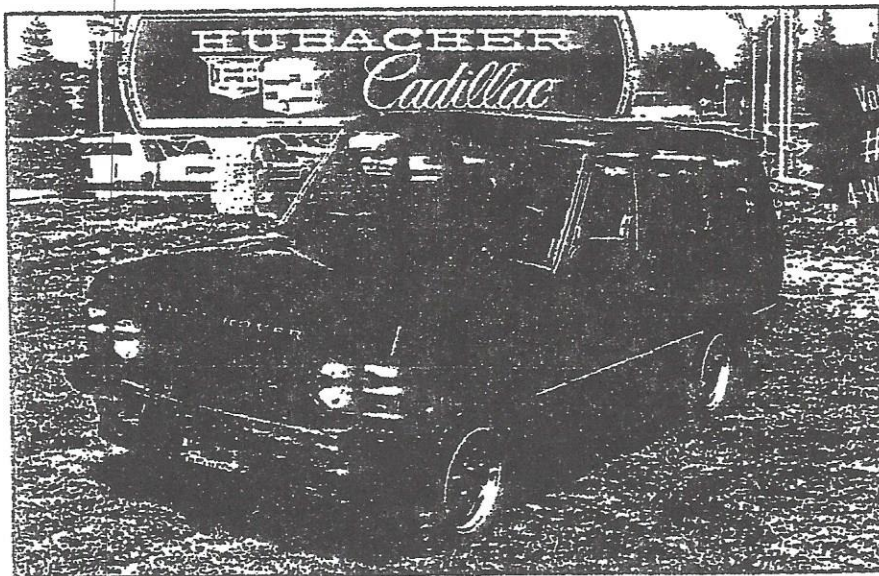
As news organizations have scaled back in the recession, Willis says, the size of the Capitol Press Corps has shrunk slightly. Women remain a distinct minority—hardly representative of their number in the general population, or in the rest of journalism. And ethnic minorities, male or female, remain largely nonexistent. With *The Bee's* reassignment of Herb Sample, who is black, to the paper's Washington bureau, there are no black reporters in the Capitol press corps, and only three Hispanic journalists—*L.A. Times* Capitol Bureau Chief Armando Acuna, *Gannett News/USA Today's* Ray Sotero and Ken Chavez at *The Bee*.

The news business in California is "still basically a white guys' operation," says Robert Forsyth, a former *Bee* editor and Capitol reporter who was press secretary to state Senate President Pro Tempore David Roberti, D-Van Nuys, and now directs media relations for the California Applicants Attorneys Association. "Look at the news organization in California. How many decisionmakers are women and minorities? Damn few."

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nile hall "are subject to a classification system—you don't put hardened boys in with the lighter offenders. That's not the case with the girls. You can have a girl who shoplifted in with a prostitute."

She believes sexual abuse of young girls and women is a far greater problem than acknowledged. "So many of these girls come through the system after having been abused sexually," she says. "Many, many are victimized by young men, 25 and 30, who prey on young girls. It is a serious problem, and we are not spending anywhere near the time and energy we need to be spending on it."

"We keep crying the blues about the high rates of teenage pregnancy, but what are we doing about it? Sacramento has an intolerably high level of infant mortality, even worse for black youngsters. One agency doesn't talk to another. The juvenile justice system doesn't talk to Health and Human Services, and so forth. It's maddening trying to find services for these kids."

Lytle has established "a protocol in very preliminary stages" which targets minors for referral to the Sacramento County Department of Health and Human Services, which does a "needs assessment" and refers the young person to services ranging from prenatal care for pregnant teenagers to food programs.

"I'm not a cultural anthropologist or a sociologist," Lytle says, the anger rising in her voice, "but I have come to wonder just how much America cares about our children. We talk a good line, but I look at our child abuse rates, our infant mortality rates, and I really wonder . . . So-called underdeveloped countries on this planet save more babies than we do. And when we do give people, or the family, some help, we make them work so hard to get it. If you want one service, you go to one office. If you need another, you go to another."

And she believes children's issues are women's issues. "Children are raised by women for the most part . . . If you want to deal with women's issues, a good place to start is the child. The most sensitive predictor of poverty for a woman is to have a baby as a teenager."

She blames media imagery and a societal preoccupation with sex for the "mixed messages" girls receive about female sexuality. "We need to teach girls and a lot of women about sex," Lytle says. "That whole 'just say no to drugs' campaign makes some sense in the sexual arena. Too many of them grow up thinking that they're just a body, that to be popular with boys you have to give it up. I see 12-year-olds, they hardly have any breasts, and they're little sexpots. The only way they can relate to men is as a vamp."

"This nation is preoccupied with sex, and it is to the detriment of girls." ▼

Ginger Rutland, longtime Capitol Bureau reporter for San Francisco's KRON-TV who became an editorial writer for *The Bee* when KRON closed its Sacramento bureau in 1988, recalls a gubernatorial news conference when George Deukmejian was first elected in 1982. Reporters were asking a lot of questions about the governor's all-white male cabinet appointments, says Rutland, who for many years was the only black reporter covering the Capitol.

"He [Deukmejian] looked around the governor's press conference room and said, 'All you people asking me questions are pretty male and pretty white.' There were titters around the room. But all of these people who were asking sanctimonious questions about lack of color and lack of diversity in his administration were left with this reality that there was a lack of diversity in their own ranks."

Women reporters covering the state Capitol in the 1970s reported widespread incidents of what today would be regarded as especially egregious sexual harassment—largely tolerated as a fact of life in that milieu.

In a 1985 *California Journal* article, former UPI Capitol Bureau Chief LaVally detailed sexually harassing behavior by prominent male legislators—and named them. Among other incidents, she recounted how the late Assemblyman Walter Ingalls once sent a male reporter "into gales of laughter by saying, in front of me, that another woman reporter looked like she had visited 'a gynecologist with cold fingers.'"

"Some legislators were sexist, some were egalitarian, some were flirtatious," LaVally recalled in a 1990 interview. "Jim Mills [who was Senate President Pro Tempore when LaVally went to the Capitol in 1977] called me the poor man's Brenda Starr. On the other hand, today, [David] Roberti would never do that. I think today there are more Robertis than Jim Millses. A lot more women lobbyists and legislators have showed up and changed the chemistry. And I've gotten older. The interaction is different. I'm more respected for what I do."

Although women reporters say their treatment at the Capitol has improved substantially over the years, problems remain. There is "definitely some sexism" remaining among Capitol habitues, says Kathleen Z. McKenna, former *Oakland Tribune* Capitol reporter, who left a temporary position with *The Bee* in August to become a public affairs representative for Kaiser-Permanente.

"I don't think it's always overt, but there is an undercurrent that is always there," says McKenna, who also teaches

journalism at Cosumnes River College. "Is it a problem, or do you work around it? No, it's not usually a problem. Yes, I work around it."

KXTV's Deborah Pacyna, who last year became 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. There is something about politics. It's like sports. There's kind of a club thing."

Rutland says the Capitol camaraderie among largely male reporters and the officials they cover often prevents investigative reporting and coverage of the serious issues. "I don't think there is a lot of good coverage of the Capitol by anybody," she says. "There is a lack of real work. The agencies are largely ignored by the Capitol press corps, which thinks it has to wait and watch those people [legislators] go through their file on the floor when really little or nothing of substance is going on. They do their ritual coverage—a lot of inside stuff."

Bob Forsyth, who started at the Capitol with AP in 1969, then went to *The Sacramento Union* and *The Bee*, says, "Basically, it's pack journalism—and that would be the case even if it were 50 percent or 80 percent women."

Perhaps because they are historic outsiders who distrust—or are distrusted by—so-called Capitol insiders, women reporters in Sacramento have often been responsible for pioneering coverage of issues previously ignored by their male peers.

"Sometimes men get caught up in the politics of something," says the AP's Kerr, "without stopping to think about the people affected—often women and children."

Claire Cooper, who now covers legal affairs for *The Bee*, says abortion issues were not adequately covered when she was assigned to the Capitol because male reporters "did not see it as a significant issue."

"Women tend to have different sources," Cooper says. "There's overlap, but I have a helluva lot of women sources, people who are comfortable with me, female legislators. I didn't deal with the same old-boys' club, and I had less willingness to buy into the established pecking order." ▼

Sigrid Bathen is a former Sacramento Bee reporter who teaches journalism at California State University, Sacramento. A founder of the Women's Caucus of the Sacramento Newspaper Guild and president of Sacramento Women in the Media in the 1970s, she has done extensive research on women in the media. This story is part of her CSUS master's thesis. A version of this article was published in the California Republic magazine in 1992.