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WHERE THE BOYS ARE: PRESIDENT OBAMA'S INNER CIRCLE, WITH BARELY A WOMAN IN EVIDENCE

THE FEMALE FACTOR

The year 2013 has seen a record number of congresswomen take office. So will they finally shake up Washington? asks **Amanda Foreman**.

There was high emotion on the steps of the Capitol in early January, when the 61 Democratic congresswomen now elected to office were called for a portrait shortly before their swearing in for the 113th Congress. The group includes a range of backgrounds that would never have been seen on the Hill a generation ago, from the first open bisexual to the first Hindu and the first Buddhist. Media outlets have declared 2013 the Year of the Woman, and despite the freezing chill, there were cheers and laughter all around. This was their moment, and the women savored it.

But is the claim true? Is the revolution finally here? It's been declared twice before, in 1972 and 1992. Each time, an upswing in women entering Congress seemed like a watershed moment – before turning out to be just a slight change to the status quo. The new numbers are far from huge – a mere seven more women in

Congress, bringing the total to 98 female members out of 535. And even though President Obama appeared eager to bring women into prominent posts during his first administration, his new team of advisers in the wake of Hillary Clinton's departure looks and feels heavily male.

Power in Washington, though, isn't just about numbers – whether in the White House or Congress. It's also about how business gets done. And here there has been a sea change. In the 113th Congress, women hold more influential positions than ever before: five committee chairs in the Senate and five of the fifteen elected leadership positions in the House. To find out how much is really changing for women in Washington and what difficulties they still face, I talked over several weeks, both on and off the record, to members of both houses. Is a fundamental shift taking place behind the scenes? And, if so, will it do anything to ease the gridlock in Congress?

The usually pristine halls of the three congressional office buildings on Independence Avenue are crammed to bursting with boxes and furniture. Controlled chaos descends on the Capitol complex after every election, and this year is no different. Many of the 435 House members pack up and move offices (some never to return). One congressman's office appears to have been taken hostage by a stack of computer towers. Outside another, a sign on an old-fashioned office chair reads, DON'T THINK OF TAKING THIS CHAIR. DON'T EVEN LOOK AT IT.

The House has always been a rougher and tougher place than the Senate, though neither is known to be a particularly easy environment for women. "Think of one as a country club and the other as a truck stop," a Senate aide tells me. The jostling for power sometimes stills over into ordinary life. "Even in shopping malls, men will step back and let you get on the elevator," observes a congresswoman from the South. "The men here don't do that." Another remarked that, on her arrival just a few years ago, there were times it took real guts to face down the testosterone on the floor of the House. "I often felt like I was going from the playing field to the locker room. The only thing that wasn't happening was the snapping of the towels."

But missing some niceties of behavior is hardly a cause célèbre compared to what the pioneers faced in the seventies and eighties. Despite Bella Abzug's (D-NY) famous 1970 campaign slogan, "This woman's place is in the House – the House of Representatives," she and her ten sister House members (up four from the previous Congress) were left in no doubt where the male members thought they belonged. There was a men's restroom by the floor of the House, for example, but the women's was down the hall. By the same token, the men's gym was a spacious room stocked with weights and the latest exercise machines. The women's was a small cell with five hooded hair dryers and a Ping-Pong table. Politically the House was divided as well. The men could talk on any subject; the women were allowed two. "I would get a call from the Speaker," recalls a Republican member, "and he would say, 'We have a bill on the floor tomorrow. We'd like you to speak.' I would ask, 'Is it child care or

education?” The House “had an attitude,” remembers Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA), who was elected to Congress in 1982. “It was not a welcome place for women.”

Boxer moved to the Senate in 1993. There she encountered a radically different environment. “You have to behave in the Senate,” she says. “You cannot be a bully, and if you try – and some do – you won’t get anywhere. The rules of the Senate give huge power to one senator, so it doesn’t matter if you’re black or white, female or male, 85 or 30; any senator can stop the proceeding and force a vote, so you have to treat everybody with dignity and respect.”

Even so, the acceptance of female members can be halting. One woman senator describes the annoyance of being forced to introduce herself over and over again. “I was on an elevator with two of my staff members, and a male senator got on and said, ‘Do you know this is the senators-only elevator?’ My staff guy said, ‘She *is* a senator.’ I thought, Come on, I’ve been here three months, and there are only 100 of us. I looked at him. I knew exactly who he was, but I answered, ‘And who are you?’”

Despite such stories of past slights, the women interviewed are fearless about fighting their corner. Just understand, says a House member, “this job isn’t for everyone. You have to be as tough as nails. So if you’re not willing to do what it takes, I wouldn’t recommend it.” They are prepared to demand equal airtime on the networks and Sunday-morning news programs (sample data from 2010 shows that male lawmakers grabbed the screen 86 percent of the time). And they are unabashed about calling attention to inconsistencies. It was pointed out to me several times that Speaker John Boehner has been featured on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*, but never Nancy Pelosi, whose achievements are far more historic. “I now have a titanium back,” says one congresswoman with a laugh. Adds a retiring member, “After more than 20 years in office, I knew I was strong. But I now know that there isn’t anything that I can’t do. Not anything.”

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Women who go into politics may learn to be resilient, but research into why they are so greatly outnumbered by men has shown that one of the biggest obstacles remains women themselves. They often wait to be asked rather than putting themselves forward; they fear the harm that being in the public eye may do to their families; they are less willing to ask directly for campaign funds; and they prefer to wait until their children are older. Yet when they do run, they enjoy the same success rate as men, and when they win, their impact is disproportionate to their numbers. It’s because, says a senator, “women don’t get elected by putting on a flight suit and swaggering across a flight deck. They get elected by getting things accomplished, and that carries through in how they govern.” Congresswomen consistently outperform men on a practical level. When it comes to winning Federal funds and support for the district, it is much better to have a woman fighting on your behalf. Political scientists have calculated that the bonus to constituents in electing a woman legislator runs to about \$88 per head in government spending.

But women can be held back by the fact that the same obstacles facing many working mothers are extreme in Washington. To succeed in the House, in Niki Tsongas's (D-MA) opinion, "you really have to commit to the responsibilities that you've earned." That translates, for everyone except those living in the mid-Atlantic states, into committing to a 70-hour week divided between the Washington office and the home district, plus long flights at either end, and not seeing the family except on the weekends.

No financial allowance is made for members—most of whom earn \$174,000 a year—with dependent families. If they want to maintain two residences, they must pay for both out of pocket. Pelosi has tried to help them: "We've gone through some of the practical aspects of this, about how they could use their funds to have their children travel with them on a regular basis, but the rules are very tough in that regard, and they're not family-friendly." "Maybe the toughest part for me has been the lonely part," admits one congresswoman. Another points out that for the men it's different. The Capitol's bar culture is heavily male because a night of drinking with the guys carries no stigma for them: "So they head to clubs. But that's not something I'm going to do."

Since there is no per diem rate for the commuters, most congressmen sleep in their offices. For those wanting privacy, a cot can sometimes be squeezed into the office bathroom, and clothes stored in a makeshift wardrobe. The men's gym provides a place to shower and shave. No congresswoman has yet followed the male members' example and become a sofa-sleeper. Says one, "As a woman, you would be putting your staff in an odd position. Imagine them having to ask, 'Are you decent?' I don't think it makes for a good work environment to have the members sleep in their office." For one thing, the Capitol is a veritable gossip mill. "People are automatically going to assume the worst," a congressional aide admits, especially since "there are male members who are sleeping with their female chiefs of staff." So the women grit their teeth and put up with having their clothes, makeup, and papers spread halfway across the country. Coming from California, House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi endures the same frustration as everyone else. "This morning I thought, You know, I want to start dressing like a man. I'm going to get a few suits. I'm going to get a few shirts. I'm going to get a few scarves, and I'm going to travel with one suit and two shirts. We could never do it, but it's amazing how much easier it would be."

The pressures sometimes reach near-comical levels. Since voting in the Senate often takes place in the evening, members are tied to the Capitol unless they can reach the floor in less than 20 minutes. "You're in a place that is so male-dominated, you wonder, Do any of them ever cook dinner?" sighs an exasperated senator. "They just live in a world that's completely separate from their family life." Another laughs at the lengths she has gone to in order to manage both: "One time I had promised my daughter I would take her to Target to buy a swimsuit for the end-of-school pool party. But we were voting on national-security issues and it was a nighttime vote, so my husband took her instead. I'm about to go onto the floor to vote and she calls me from the dressing room, crying: 'Dad doesn't understand the difference between a bikini and a

tankini. They said we couldn't wear bikinis, but we can wear tankinis.' I say, 'Get him on the phone right now.' So I have him on the phone, and I'm explaining the difference and why she could get a tankini. At that moment I literally run into a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee as he is leaving the floor. I thought at that moment, OK, I'm not balancing everything that well."

But the payoff for the women in both houses is that their shared experiences give them the strength of common purpose. "Our presence and perspectives do a great benefit to the common good because they broaden the outlook on what the solutions are to the issues," says Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY). Of course, says Congresswoman Donna Edwards (D-MD), "on some core issues we share widely divergent philosophies. But when it really comes down to it and we start talking about the challenges of raising our children, having personal relationships and careers, we share a lot of similarities. It opens the space for the possibility of really working together in a broader fashion."

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The women's willingness to embrace bipartisanship was either ignored or discounted in the early years. "The seniority system meant that women literally had no power, because there had been so few women there over the years," explains Barbara Boxer. "Women weren't included in any of the meaningful meetings." This changed in the House after Nancy Pelosi made it her goal to find ways around the status quo to push women through, in her words, "the marble ceiling." Having a critical mass of women with both seniority and power means more than just giving encouragement to other women, says Pelosi. "Women are very operational: They get the job done. They are consensus builders, too. They listen; they are editors; they weed out what isn't necessary to get an impact." A congressman I spoke to agrees that the women members in both houses have bipartisan skills that the male members can only envy. On one particular health issue, "I noticed how well they worked together. They had jelled their message, but they all had an individual way of getting to it."

The Senate has been an even better showcase: "Women have proven to be problem solvers who work across the aisle to get things done," says Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), whose own legislative history includes working with Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) to pass a bill to prevent shortages of cancer drugs, and former senator Olympia Snowe (R-Me) to help fight sexual assault in the military. "Many of the major pieces of legislation that passed the Senate last year—from the farm bill to the transportation bill to the Violence Against Women Act—were spearheaded by women who got bipartisan support."

Some male senators are talking about breaking the chronic logjam by making the Senate more like the House, and changing the rule that a single person can stymie a bill. The problem isn't the rules, argue their female counterparts, it's too much testosterone. Look at how we operate, says Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA). "For

example, the other women senators and I get together about once a month to have dinner in a sort of off-the-record way. It enables us to build relationships that help us work together, particularly on issues like women's health and opportunities for women in business."

For the 113th Congress, the women have a mission. They intend to make the way they naturally do business become the norm rather than the exception. "It feels great to be powerful," acknowledges a senator. "It's been one of the big changes here. I make no apologies for it. The more I can get, the more I can help solve problems, and that's what I'm happy to do."