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Women's groups battle sexism in politics

By Travis Fain

They call it good-ol'-boy politics for a reason: 83 percent of congressional seats are held by men.

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Among the 100 largest cities in the United States, seven have female mayors, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. In state legislatures across the country, 75 percent of the seats are held by men, the center reports.

Women are doing two percentage points better in North Carolina, where they hold 27 percent of the seats in the General Assembly. Gov. Bev Perdue became the state's first female governor in 2009. Of the state's 15 U.S. House and Senate seats, three, or 20 percent, are held by women.

But a persistent sexism pervades American politics and media coverage, according to women's groups behind a new push to call out sexism, because they believe that it can prevent women from increasing their numbers.

"The goal is to address widespread sexism in the media," said Jamia Wilson, the vice president of programs for the Women's Media Center in Washington. The group is one of several entities behind the "Name It, Change It" campaign.

If you hear a talking head on the news comment on a woman's hair, her wardrobe or emotional state, it was probably "just plain sexist," according to the effort's Web site, www.nameitchangeit.org. The Women's Media Center and other groups want people to report sexist language through the website to help hold people accountable.

The site includes several examples, mostly from conservative media. There was Rush Limbaugh's comment last year that U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu of Louisiana was "maybe the most expensive prostitute in the history of prostitution" in reference to the deal that won her vote on the health-care overhaul. G. Gordon Liddy openly wondered last year whether Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor's menstrual cycle would affect her judgment on the court.

Sexism in the media is "a legitimate issue" for discussion, said the publisher of *The Fayetteville Observer*, Charles Broadwell, who recently became the president of the N.C. Press Association's board. There's a longstanding preoccupation with people's appearances, and people seem to focus on it more with women, he said.

"I think it's a great topic that all of us in the news media should be considering," Broadwell said.

In North Carolina, some state politicians say they are used to a men-only attitude — and the general acceptance of

sexist talk wherever it occurs.

State Sen. Linda Garrou, D-Forsyth, helps write the state budget, but said she's heard such language at the state Capitol.

Men, Garrou said, are taught to apologize for their weaknesses. But sometimes women feel they need to hide their strength and "put on gloves to cover a firm hand," she said.

But Garrou, 67, said that "so many smart, talented women" are on legislative staffs at the Capitol and that she sees things changing as the generations pass.

Others say they have not seen a great deal of serious sexism.

State Rep. Julia Howard, R-79th District, said she finds people to be "very respectful, particularly our male counterparts." She also said she has rarely encountered issues herself in her 11 terms.

"I'm not saying this in a manner that is unkind to the female members; maybe some people are a little too sensitive to things that might be said or taken out of context," Howard said. For example, she said, "We have some older members that call everybody 'honey.'

"They don't mean anything," Howard said. "Their grandfather said it. We're in the South, and that's pretty much a tradition."

Perdue, through her press office, said that "many friends and colleagues of both genders helped me along the road I have traveled in public service."

"I know firsthand what it's like to deal with perceptions of me based on the fact that I'm a woman," Perdue said in an e-mailed statement. "There will always be those whose views — whether on gender, race, religion or other issues of equality — remain mired in the past, and all we can do is let our actions prove them wrong."

U.S. Rep. Virginia Foxx, a Republican who represents North Carolina's 5th District in Congress, said surveys have shown that whenever women do not make up a critical mass of participants in any group, sexism can be "very strong and that women feel it."

Foxx's female colleagues in Congress frequently discuss how "guys ignore the fact that we're here a lot of times," she said.

"They will get a group of people together and realize they're all men, and then we hold up our hand say, 'Hey, how come you didn't invite any women?' And they promise to do better, and then the same thing happens."

Foxx said she doesn't believe sexism is malicious but rather a result of men being together in such settings as the gym or golf course. But women frequently are not identified as potential candidates for a seat in government or lose out on leadership opportunities because of the lack of inclusiveness, she said.

The way women she knows get around that obstacle, she said, is by working harder.

"And I think the men respect us for that. And ultimately that gets their attention."

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Journal reporter Les Gura contributed to this article.