HISTORICALLY, Idaho women have served a political role as supporters and campaigners for their politician husbands. Today the tables are turned as women are stepping out from behind the men to take their place in front of the podium.

Twenty-eight women now serve in the 126-seat Idaho Legislature. Although Idaho has never had a female governor or lieutenant governor, the position of state treasurer, now filled by Lydia Justice-Edwards, has been held by a woman for 26 years. Although numerically, women are still a minority in Idaho's political circles, the traditionally conservative state is electing more and more women each year to political office.

"There is a growing public perception of women as being a viable force in politics," says Rep. Patricia L. McDermott, a 10-term legislator from Pocatello. "I think at the ballot box, the electorate doesn't hold being a woman against you. There is a different atmosphere now, and voting for a woman is not that traumatic."

By Marie Russell
But the presence of women has meant more than just occupying seats at the Statehouse. Idaho laws have been altered as women have brought on legislation dealing with day care and domestic violence and other concerns that were previously considered "women's" issues.

McDermott points out that these issues were not raised singly by women legislators, but came about because they were concerns of the electorate. "For the most part, legislators reflect the philosophies of their constituents," she says.

"Women approach politics differently; they have sensitivity that men do not show," says Ann Rydalch, a third-term senator from Idaho Falls. Rydalch says, however, that in spite of the term "women's issues," a bill won't go anywhere if it's "not a good bill."

"You take a look at each issue and because you support it, it does not become a woman's issue. It needs to be a good bill and serve constituents," she says.

Three women in the Idaho house chair committees, including Rep. Kathleen "Kitty" Gurnsey of Boise, who co-chairs the powerful Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee (JFAC). Gurnsey, who has climbed the legislative ladder of power, says that for anyone to succeed in politics it takes "charisma and brains." But for women, key qualities also include extra time and money.

"The average businessman cannot afford to be in the Legislature," says Gurnsey, a seven-term member. "It's an ideal arrangement for someone who does not monetarily have to support themselves. A single woman can't do it — only someone with no financial or time concerns."

Gurnsey waited until her youngest child was 16 before she ran for public office. Her husband could support the family financially, so Gurnsey had the freedom to pursue a political career.

Gurnsey's sentiments are echoed by Rydalch. "It would be extremely difficult for women with small children. There's a lot of commitment to this work," she says.

Juggling a career, politics and a family can take a serious toll on women, Gurnsey says. Many working women are counted among those in the Legislature, including an attorney, restaurant owner, a legal secretary and a dental hygienist. Gurnsey says many times the pressure proves too much.

"Politics is very hard on marriages. When households are forced to put the woman's concerns before the man's, it can cause problems," she says. "Traditionally when men were the only ones involved in politics, women would serve as campaign managers. Men are not eager to fill that role for women."

But the struggles between men and women haven't been so pronounced in the House and Senate chambers. For the most part, women legislators say they are accepted by their male counterparts, but admit that hints of discrimination exist.

"Actually, they weren't as chauvinistic [when I started] as they are now," McDermott says. "At that time it wasn't a threat; it may have been considered a little exceptional. But now there are a number of bright, intelligent women succeeding in politics and it's becoming very pressing."

Mary Lloyd, a freshman legislator from Pocatello, said she hasn't encountered many difficulties based on discrimination.

"You have to gain respect from each other," she says. "You don't gain it by crying 'I'm the woman or I'm the man.'"

Rydalch agrees with Lloyd, saying that, although she has encountered "a little bit of a male ego problem," she finds male legislators are "just as willing to listen."

"Idaho has been good in the sense that I've never felt blocked out because I was a woman," she says. "Working up into other elected positions, though, a woman needs to prove herself a little longer in the trenches to get support."

The highest elected position, that of governor, has never been sought by a woman. The closest they have come to the position is former Idaho treasurer Marjorie Ruth Moon's unsuccessful bid for lieutenant governor in 1986. But all agree that there is no reason why the governorship should elude a woman candidate.

"It will be the issues that decide it," says Rydalch. "It's experience and expertise that the electorate would gravitate toward."

McDermott says it's a matter of timing and that women are no longer a "novelty" in political office.

"When it comes to gubernatorial races, it's a matter of timing and who's available to run," she says. "Women in both parties are playing increasing roles. It's the equality of opportunity, Idaho is way past the days of tokenism."