

# Social Inequality

Patterns and Processes

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**Stability and Change in the American Ethnic Hierarchy 294***Efforts at Changing the Hierarchy 295**Affirmative Action 296***Summary 300****Chapter 12: Gender Inequality 302****Gender Differentiation 303***Sex and Gender 303***Gender Stratification 305***Why Gender Inequality? 305**Sexism and the Ideology of Female Inferiority 307***Gender Inequality in the Workforce: Continuity and Change 308***Labor Force Participation 308**Occupational Concentration 310**Earnings 312**Authority 314**Work and the Family 315***Patterns of Gender Inequality: Politics, the Corporation,  
and Education 316***Gender Inequality in the Political World 316**Gender Inequality in the Corporate World 318**Women and Education 320***The Status of Women in Global Perspective 322***Discrimination and Abuse 322**Women and Power 325***The Feminist Movement 327***Feminism 327**The Feminist Ideological Spectrum 328***Summary 330****Chapter 13: Political Inequality 332****Political Stratification 332***The Scope and Dimensions of Power 332**Elites and Masses 334***Three Models of Power in America 335***The Class Model 336**The Power Elite Model 338*

## Gender Inequality

*Real equality is going to come not when a female Einstein is recognized as quickly as a male Einstein, but when a female schlemiel is promoted as quickly as a male schlemiel.*

BELLA ABZUG

Lee Un Kee lives in a tiny farming village in South Korea named Punsooilri, thirty miles from Seoul, the capital city. He has been married for twenty-four years. When asked if he has beaten his wife, he indignantly replies "How could I have been married all these years and not beaten my wife? Of course, you have to apologize afterward," he adds. "Otherwise, you can have bad feelings in your relationship with your wife." Chong Chin Suk, a fifty-six-year-old woman who runs Punsooilri's village store, admits that "Of course my husband beats me. But it was my fault because I scolded him." She explains, "Maybe there are some cases where it's just the man's fault. But ultimately the woman is to blame, because if she won't argue with her husband, he probably won't beat her." Speaking with other women in the village, it is apparent that wife-beating is quite commonplace in Punsooilri (Kristof, 1996b).

In 1996, a reactionary Islamic movement called the Taliban gained power in Afghanistan. Imposing what it interpreted as strict Islamic principles, the Taliban placed women into a state of virtual imprisonment. In Kabul, the country's major city, women were forbidden to work or to go to school. If they left their homes, they were ordered to wear garments that completely covered their bodies and concealed their eyes behind cloth mesh. If they did leave their homes, they ran the risk of being assaulted by militiamen who might deem their attire not sufficiently modest. "I'm very afraid to go out on the street," said a female surgeon. "It's terrible for a woman to be hit by a strange man" (Cooper, 1996).

Late one night in Lima, Peru, a group of drunken men in their twenties raped María Elena, a seventeen-year-old girl who was on her way home from work. In Peru, however, the law exonerates a rapist if he offers to marry the victim and she accepts. This creates a situation in which relatives of rape victims, particularly in poor and rural areas, put pressure on the girl to accept the rapist's offer. This course, they believe, will restore honor to the victim and her family. María Elena's family, though incensed by the attack, encouraged her to accept when one of the rapists offered to marry her. In some cases, the rapist threatens the victim if she refuses the offer. When María Elena first declined to marry one of her attackers, his two accomplices threatened to slash her face. Yielding to the threat and to pressure by her family, she finally relented. "What choice did I have?" she asked. "Everyone insisted that the way to solve the problem was for me to get married." Three months after the wedding, her husband abandoned her (Sims, 1997).<sup>1</sup>

To most Americans these are shocking cases of discrimination against women. But such incidents are commonplace in much of the world. Most discrimination is not as blatant and abusive as these cases demonstrate, but male dominance, referred to as **patriarchy**, is virtually universal in the contemporary world.

In 1980 the United Nations reported that women, though one-half the world's population, did two-thirds of the world's work, earned one-tenth of the world's income, and owned one-hundredth of the world's property. In the past two decades, women's subordinate status in all societies has been challenged and in many cases changed significantly; but everywhere they remain victims, in some degree, of discrimination. The 1996 U.N. Human Development Report found that in no country of the world were women treated as well as men. In short, social, economic, and political inequality between men and women is a ubiquitous phenomenon.

This chapter looks at the nature of gender inequality and explores the ways in which men and women are treated differently in society.

## Gender Differentiation

### *Sex and Gender*

What is "gender"? And how does it differ from "sex"? These are terms that are used commonly, often without considering the important difference between them. Let's consider sex first. At birth, we are biologically male or female. Our sexual organs are different, our hormones and other aspects of

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<sup>1</sup>There are similar laws pertaining to rape in fourteen other Latin American countries. In Costa Rica, the law exonerates a rapist if he offers to marry the victim, even if she does not accept.

body chemistry are different, and our biological functions are different: Women give birth; men do not. These relatively fixed physiological and biological differences are what define sex.

But the differences between men and women do not end here. They differ as well as a result of cultural, social, and psychological factors. These are differences acquired not through birth but through the socialization process. Every society establishes a set of accepted behaviors to which males and females are expected to conform. How are women expected to act, *qua* women? And, how are men expected to act, *qua* men? These are standards of femininity and masculinity and, as learned patterns of behavior, will vary from society to society; they are not fixed or constant. These socially and culturally determined differences are what constitute gender. In a very real sense, then, we are born male or female, but we must learn to be men and women.

Whether gender identity and gender roles stem from biological differences or are the product of historical, social, environmental, and technological circumstances is a matter of intense debate among anthropologists and sociologists (Chafetz, 1978). Although few would hold that gender roles are entirely either biologically or socially determined, the prevailing social science position is that culture is the key to understanding most differences in male and female behavior. In this view, there is nothing "natural" about women playing nurturing occupational roles (like nurse or schoolteacher) or men playing more assertive and peremptory roles (like soldier or doctor). Gender differences are a product of socialization, discrimination, and other forms of social control (Epstein, 1988).

Proof of this position is found in the fact that women do not fill the same roles (spouse, mother, and so on) the same way from one society to another. Moreover, the "correct" or expected behavior for males and females, that is, the standards that define masculinity and femininity, constantly undergo change. As social conditions change, gender roles will change accordingly. Anthropologist Marvin Harris points out that evidence from primate studies indicates that there is no hormonal barrier "that would prevent women from learning to be more aggressive than men if the exigencies of social life were to call for women to assume aggressive gender roles and for men to be more passive" (1989:266). This is already beginning to occur in modern societies as men take on more child-rearing responsibilities, calling for more nurturant behavior, and as women enter into highly competitive professional occupations.

Nonetheless, few would deny that biology imposes limits on the social roles that men and women play. Anthropologist Lionel Tiger (1969), for example, explains that human gender roles evolved naturally as males were physically equipped to be hunters and women were the bearers of children.

Biology and culture should not be seen as mutually exclusive in any case. What is generally understood is that the two are inextricably linked in determining male and female roles and behavior. Biologically derived characteris-

tics are always processed by cultural influences. As Alice Rossi explains, men and women are biologically predisposed to certain roles, but those roles are subsequently refined by and fitted into various cultures (1977, 1984).

## Gender Stratification

Whatever the basis of gender roles, it is quite evident that they are not evaluated or rewarded equally; in virtually all societies, women are subordinate to men (Chafetz, 1978; Friedl, 1978). There is, then, in all societies a gender hierarchy, just as there is a class hierarchy, an ethnic hierarchy, and so on. And as the subordinate stratum in this hierarchy, women have less access to wealth, power, and prestige. The gender hierarchy, however, is less complex and variegated than the others, simply because most societies have constructed only two genders.<sup>2</sup>

### *Why Gender Inequality?*

Explanations of why men and women have, throughout human history, played different roles and why those roles have been unequally rewarded have been the focus of much social science research and remain strongly debated issues. The intention of this chapter is not to engage the debate but simply to explore the various forms of gender inequality in the United States and other contemporary societies. In brief, however, as with explanations for class inequality (Chapter 8), gender inequality has been explained from various theoretical perspectives, each offering a somewhat different account for the virtually universal feature of male dominance in human societies. What follows represents a small sample of theoretical attempts at explaining gender inequality.

Functional theories posit that gender differentiation and stratification contribute in some fashion to accomplishing critical tasks (Nielsen, 1990). These theories focus on the different roles that men and women play and the way each contributes to the society's survival. Gender inequality is seen not as the outgrowth of differential power but rather as functionally necessary.

In preindustrial societies, the role differentiation of men and women can be seen clearly. In hunting-and-gathering societies, which typified the economic structure of societies for most of human history, hunting was almost universally a male activity whereas foraging was mostly done by women. Friedl (1978) suggests that one of the major reasons for this specialization was that women were usually either pregnant or caring for young children. The particular skills

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<sup>2</sup>As Judith Lorber points out, however, neither gender nor sex are pure categories. "Combinations of incongruous genes, genitalia, and hormonal input are ignored in sex categorization, just as combinations of incongruous physiology, identity, sexuality, appearance, and behavior are ignored in the social construction of gender statuses" (Lorber, 1995:34). Alternative, or third, genders have been recognized in some societies, but these cases are uncommon (Nanda, 1990).

required of hunting precluded women's participation since they could not be performed by a woman carrying a child, either in pregnancy or in her arms.

With the emergence of agrarian societies, preparing the soil and planting crops became mostly a male function, and tending and harvesting was assigned to women (Murdock, 1935). Although in industrial societies these role assignments no longer seem functionally necessary, certain roles, in the functionalist view, remain gender-specific. Women continue to fulfill roles like child rearing that require expressive qualities such as affection and compassion. Men, by contrast, fulfill instrumental roles as major breadwinners (Parsons and Bales, 1955).

Theorists using a conflict perspective see gender differentiation not as functionally necessary, but attribute it to some form of power that one gender—almost always men—derives from its social role. This power differential generates gender inequality.

Some theorists in this camp stress control over the distribution of material goods. Ernestine Friedl (1978) explains that in a few technologically simple societies, there is relative equality between men and women because both sexes work side by side in food production and what is produced is distributed equitably among workers. Gender inequality begins to emerge as societies become more productive and as women play a reduced economic role. In modern societies, so long as women do not exercise control over the investment of money—the key societal resource—they will have little power and social recognition. Within the home, too, women who work not in the labor force but as housewives, providing services to husbands and children without pay, are especially vulnerable to male dominance. Progress toward true gender equality is stimulated by the acquisition by women of positions of power in the economy and political system, as in the United States and other industrial societies.

A somewhat related theory suggests that gender inequality stems from the childbearing role of women. The essential argument is that women are encumbered for lengthy periods by pregnancy, nursing, and related activities. Logically, then, as human societies evolved, women assumed domestic roles, those that revolved around child care and household duties, and men assumed hunting and related activities that occasionally took them away from the family or community (Huber, 1990). The resources of knowledge, weaponry, and technology that derived from these activities provided men with economic power and prestige. Women's activities, on the other hand, were seen as routine and mundane.

Randall Collins (1971) theorizes that innate physical differences are the key to understanding the origins of gender inequality. He explains that since humans have a strong drive for sexual gratification and males are, on average, bigger and stronger than females, men can force themselves on the weaker sex. This element of coercion has thus shaped the fundamental features of the woman's role.

## **Sexism and Sexist Stereotypes**

As with other forms of social inequality, an ideology has served to rationalize and stabilize male dominance. This ideology, **sexism**, is essentially the belief that women and men are innately different and that those innate differences translate into female inferiority. With sexism, sex differences are assumed to produce differences in social behavior. Women or men can be no other way because they are born that way. "Biology is destiny," as the expression goes.<sup>3</sup>

Over many generations, the sexist ideology has created a self-fulfilling prophecy. Male dominance in various spheres of social life led to the assumption that their superiority was natural. This, in turn, shaped people's expectations. One did not expect to see a woman military leader or a woman business executive or a woman politician. These were assumed to be "naturally" male-occupied positions, requiring skills and talents that women, by nature, did not possess. Hence, women were not trained to take such positions, which, as a result, continued to be filled primarily by men.

**Sexist Stereotypes** A set of stereotypes has developed historically that has served as the basis of the ideology of sexism. As with racism, members of the categories "male" and "female" are assumed to carry with them certain innate characteristics. Women are "ruled by emotion," they are "less intelligent" than men, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Women are commonly portrayed as being more compassionate, sensitive, and dependent than men, who are seen as mentally tough, decisive, and independent. These stereotypes are supported by various types of gendered language: sex-linked adjectives (for example, a "beautiful" woman, but a "handsome" man), occupational titles and forms of address, slang phrases, and so on (Chafetz, 1978).

Surprisingly, despite recent changes in gender relations and in women's family and occupational roles, many of these stereotypes remain persistent. In 1990 a national survey found that well over half of all Americans believed that there were basic personality and mental differences between men and women. More important, many of the standard stereotypes were used to describe each gender (DeStefano and Colasanto, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>Sexism has been variously defined. Some see it as any form of prejudice or discrimination against people based on their sex (Benokraitis, 1997). Others have defined it as "the subordination of women by men" (Rothenberg, 1998:132), and others as a synonym for gender stratification (Nielsen, 1990). The term as it is used here implies a belief in the biological grounding of social and behavioral differences between men and women.

<sup>4</sup>Nineteenth-century scientists assumed that since women's brains were smaller than men's, the superior male intellect was a given. We know today, however, that brain size differs with body weight and, when average disparity in body weight is taken into account, women's brains are actually a bit larger than men's.



Sexist stereotypes continue to serve as justifications for gender inequality in different spheres of social life. Thus, if women are assumed to be more compassionate and sensitive, it is only logical that they continue to play occupational roles that complement these traits, such as nurse or social worker. And, by the same token, if they are not confident and decisive, they are not as capable as men of assuming important leadership positions in politics and the economy. These stereotypes have begun to lose their effectiveness, however, as women increasingly move into social roles previously dominated by males.

### **Gender Inequality in the Workforce: Continuity and Change**

The gender division of labor in the workforce is a critical factor in understanding the more general system of gender stratification. As noted in earlier chapters, power is very much dependent on control of economic resources. Thus, to the extent that women do not play a role in the economy that would enable them to control or direct the distribution of those resources, their subordinate place is sustained (Friedl, 1978). A comparative study of 111 societies concluded that women's roles are less traditional where their economic power, as indicated by their labor force participation rate, is high (South, 1988).

#### ***Labor Force Participation***

A powerful trend of the past several decades has been the entrance of women into the workforce in vastly increasing numbers and percentage. This is especially evident in the United States, where a dramatic transformation has occurred within one generation in the labor force expectations of and for women (Bianchi and Spain, 1996). In 1996 women constituted almost 50 percent of the civilian labor force. The percentage of men and women who participate in the workforce is shown in Table 12-1. As can be seen, the rate for men and women has been steadily converging over the past hundred years.

Today, women from families of all social classes and ethnic groups are workers. To be sure, women in the past were also part of the labor force, particularly working-class, immigrant, and minority women, whose economic situation required that they contribute to their family's livelihood. In recent decades, however, women from the entire social spectrum have increasingly entered the mainstream labor force as full- or part-time workers. They also work a substantial number of hours while raising families. By 1996 almost three-quarters of married women with dependent children worked in the paid labor force and almost two-fifths worked full-time and year-round (Bianchi and Spain, 1996). Unlike in past generations, the expectation of most women is no longer that they will stay at home attending to domestic chores. Although they may see themselves in this traditional family role for a period

**Table 12-1 ■ Percentage of Women and Men in the U.S. Labor Force**

Year	Women in Labor Force as % of All Women	Men in Labor Force as % of All Men	Women as % of Total Labor Force
1900	20.0	85.7	18.1
1930	23.6	82.1	21.9
1950	29.9	81.6	28.8
1970	42.6	79.7	38.1
1990	57.5	76.4	45.3
1996	59.3	74.9	46.2
2000*	60.6	74.0	47.0

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the U.S.: Colonial Times to 1970*, Part I, 1975; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1997*, Table 620.

\*Projected.

of time, they fully expect to be working in the mainstream labor force at some point in their lives.

The rate of labor force participation is not the same in all societies of the modern world. In less-developed societies and in societies where religion dictates most societal norms (particularly Muslim countries), there is less female participation than in Western industrialized countries. However, in recent decades, economic globalization has drawn many women in the underdeveloped world into the unskilled labor force. In those settings, multinational corporations manufacturing electronic products, shoes, clothing, and other consumer goods employ mainly women in their assembly plants. The low wages and often oppressive work conditions of these women have been well documented (Peterson and Runyan, 1993; Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1983).

When considering the expanding participation of women in the workforce, remember that women have traditionally engaged in unpaid, or non-market, work. And the performance of such work by women remains very much in evidence. A United Nations study reported that worldwide, 66 percent of women's work is unpaid, compared with 34 percent of men's work (United Nations, 1996). Housework and child rearing are the major forms of women's unpaid labor. Think about the time and effort spent in meal preparation, cleaning, child care, shopping, and numerous other chores that are involved in maintaining a household. Even today in industrial societies, despite the vastly increased numbers of women in the general labor force, they continue to perform most of this work. In her interviews of working couples, sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1989) asked about how they juggled work and family responsibilities. One woman described her duties as homemaker with

the metaphor of the "second shift": "You're on duty at work. You come home, and you're on duty. Then you go back to work and you're on duty" (7).

In addition to their sharply increased numbers, there are three outstanding trends in analyzing the place of women in the labor force: They are occupationally concentrated, they are more likely to be paid less than men, and they are less likely to occupy positions of authority.

### *Occupational Concentration*

In virtually all societies, work is divided along sexual lines: Some roles are assigned to men and others to women. In the 1930s, anthropologist George Murdock surveyed over three hundred technologically simple societies around the world and found in all of them a gendered division of labor. In none did men and women share work roles (Murdock, 1937). Which particular roles are typically male and which typically female, however, will differ from society to society. That is, occupations ordinarily reserved for women in one society may be reserved for men in another. For example, in the United States, the overwhelming majority of physicians have traditionally been men; only in recent years have women begun to enter the medical profession in large numbers. In Russia, however, most physicians have been—and continue to be—women. In the United States, women have been clustered in traditionally female occupations such as nurse, schoolteacher, retail salesperson, and domestic service worker. Table 12-2 shows the extent of occupational concentration in some selected cases. Note how jobs with the highest percentage of women are those that involve interpersonal skills assumed to be natural to women. Likewise, those with the fewest women involve more physically active duties, assumed to be natural to men.

Much of the occupational segregation based on gender in the United States is evident in other societies. A United Nations study of twenty-four countries indicated that over 90 percent of typists and nurses were women, closely in line with U.S. patterns (United Nations, 1991).

Another consistent occupational pattern among societies is that traditional female roles are accorded less prestige than traditional male roles (Linton, 1936). As Friedl has explained, "Evidence of a society . . . in which women's activities are the most prestigious has never been found" (1978:69). Moreover, the kind of work done by women is usually considered less valuable and is rewarded accordingly (England, 1992). It is generally the case that, the more women in an occupation, the less both its female and male workers earn (Reskin and Padavic, 1994).

Gender stereotypes sustain and reinforce occupational clustering. If it is assumed that men are more aggressive and daring by nature, police officer or firefighter become "natural" male occupations. If women are assumed to be more compassionate and nurturing, nurse or schoolteacher become "natural" female occupations. (Consider Table 12-2 again in this light.)

**Table 12-2 ■ Percentage of Women in Selected Occupations**

Occupation	1983	1996
Secretaries	99.0	98.6
Dental hygienists	98.6	98.2
Preschool and kindergarten teachers	98.2	98.1
Registered nurses	95.8	93.3
Data entry keyers	93.6	84.5
Bank tellers	91.0	90.1
Telephone operators	90.4	90.5
Hairdressers and cosmetologists	88.7	91.1
Waiters and waitresses	87.8	77.9
Elementary school teachers	83.3	83.3
Social workers	64.3	68.5
High school teachers	51.8	55.9
Real estate sales representatives	48.9	49.2
Editors and reporters	48.4	55.7
Bartenders	48.4	53.8
College and university teachers	36.3	43.5
Lawyers and judges	15.8	29.0
Physicians	15.8	26.4
Police and detectives	9.4	15.8
Engineers	5.8	8.5
Clergy	5.6	12.3
Truck drivers	3.1	5.3
Airplane pilots	2.1	1.4
Carpenters	1.4	1.3
Fire-fighting occupations	1.0	1.8
Automobile mechanics	0.5	1.2

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1997*, Table 645.

These stereotypes often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. If women are believed to be less adept at math and science, they are apt to be counseled along those lines in high school, leaving them ill-prepared for a rigorous engineering curriculum, for example, when they enter college. Women students themselves may see engineering as a male dominion and not as a field that they would find comfortable or appropriate. The overwhelming majority of engineers thus continue to be men, and engineering schools continue to struggle in attracting female students (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

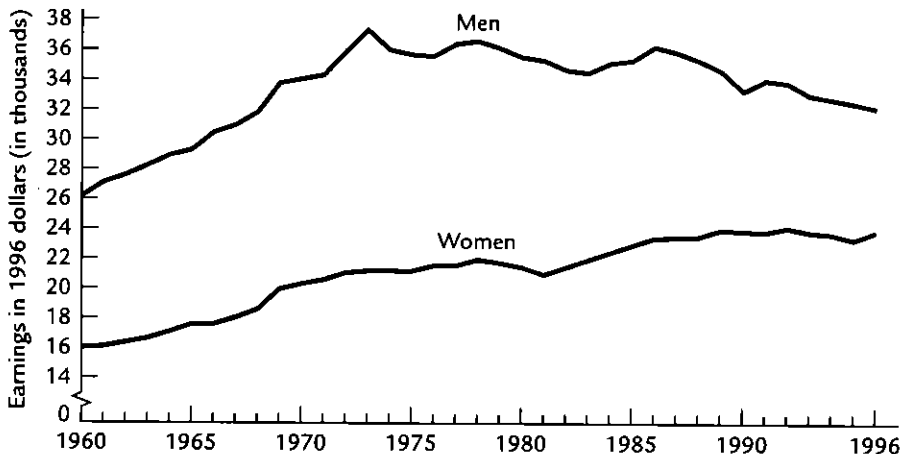
Examples abound of the ways in which gender stereotypes influence occupational selection. Consider automobile sales, a field that is primarily male. Not only are automobile salespersons expected to be aggressive (a “naturally” male trait), but they are assumed to be more familiar with automobiles and things mechanical, and thus can be more effective in dealing with customers. Real estate sales, by contrast, is a relatively gender-neutral field, with virtually no obstacles to women. Again, consider the gender stereotypes that might account for this. Women are presumably no less “naturally” knowledgeable about homes and things that relate to them than men. In both cases, there is no validity to presumed natural gender differences, but stereotypes, reinforced in all spheres of social life, continue to influence our assumptions about who should fill these positions.

Although in the United States and other modern societies men and women remain concentrated in particular occupational roles, the sexual division of labor is not as rigidly enforced as in the past, and in some cases dramatic change has occurred in recent decades. Certain fields remain overwhelmingly female, but occupational sex segregation has steadily declined since the 1970s (Reskin and Padavic, 1994; Wootton, 1997). Women can now be found in the entire range of occupations and are the majority in some fields (e.g., pharmacist, editor, insurance adjuster) that were formerly male dominated. In the case of insurance adjusters, for example, in 1990, 72 percent were women, compared to 30 percent in 1970 (Bianchi and Spain, 1996).

Most important, American women are progressively moving into occupational areas involving managerial and professional roles that were previously difficult, at best, to enter. These are precisely the kinds of positions—those involving control of valued resources and decisions regarding their distribution—that contribute to increased societal power. Women in 1970 were 18 percent of all managers; ten years later they were 30 percent, and twenty years later, 40 percent (Reskin and Padavic, 1994). At the very top of the managerial ladder, however, women have not experienced a comparable degree of mobility. This point is addressed later in this chapter.

### *Earnings*

In the aggregate, women in the United States continue to earn less than men, although, as with occupational concentration, progressive change is evident. As can be seen in Figure 12-1, the gap between men’s and women’s pay is steadily closing. Whereas in 1983 women earned two-thirds of what men earned, in 1997 they earned three-quarters of what men earned. Factoring in race reveals that black women’s earnings are closer to parity with white women’s earnings (about 85 percent) than are black men’s earnings to white men’s (about 75 percent). The earnings gap between men and women is even wider when we control for education. In 1992 women with college degrees earned almost \$12,000 less per year than



**Figure 12-1** ■ Median Earnings of Year-Round, Full-Time Workers by Sex: 1960 to 1996. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Money Income in the United States: 1996*. CPR P60-197.

males with college degrees. They earned only \$2,000 more per year than white men with only a high-school diploma (National Committee, 1995). The fact that women disproportionately occupy low-paying jobs has contributed significantly to what was described in Chapter 3 as the “feminization of poverty.”

In the past, discrepancies in pay between men and women were the result largely of direct discrimination. Employers would routinely pay women less than men for doing the same job. Their rationale was that women were not breadwinners and therefore did not require the same salary as men. Moreover, it was assumed that women were working only as a temporary measure and were not reliant on their jobs for a living, as were men. Two measures destroyed the legal basis for gender discrimination in the workforce: the Equal Pay Act of 1963, and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, passed in 1964. The former prohibited employers from paying women less than men for doing essentially the same job. Title VII prohibited discrimination in hiring or in wages on the basis of race or sex.

What, then, accounts for the continued gender discrepancy in pay? Economists today explain that the differentials in pay between men and women are mostly the result of the particular occupational areas in which women find themselves concentrated (Reskin and Padavic, 1994). More are in unskilled, poor-paying jobs, particularly in the low end of the service sector. This includes restaurant workers, retail salespersons, and domestic service workers. Because of child-rearing responsibilities, women have often chosen less-demanding or part-time jobs in order to assure flexibility. These jobs pay less and provide little in the way of training or skills acquisition that would lead to more demanding and better-paying jobs. Women must also take time

away from work during pregnancy, causing a further deterioration of skills and wages (Bianchi and Spain, 1996). As women increase their investment in human capital (education, skills, and experience) and also delay childbirth, they should, in this view, increase their productivity and earnings vis-à-vis men. There is evidence to support this view. Among young, educated workers, the wage gap is close to disappearing (Ingrassia and Wingert, 1995).

Many sociologists, however, point to continuing discrimination, albeit in more subtle, institutional forms than in the past, as a factor in accounting for the wage gap between men and women. They emphasize that the increasing convergence of men's and women's wages is the result primarily of changes in societal views of women's abilities, as well as affirmative action and other legal measures, that have forced employers to hire more women. Also, they explain the narrowing gender gap in some part as simply a result of the decline in men's earnings. Sociologists also stress the power advantages that men continue to hold in gaining access to elite positions, enabling them to define how jobs are to be categorized and rewarded (Bianchi and Spain, 1996).

Comparable worth is an issue that emerged in the 1980s and is seen by some as a principal means of closing the pay gap between men and women. **Comparable worth** refers to the proposition that men and women should be paid the same for jobs of equal or comparable worth. This idea extends the notion of "equal pay for equal work," which merely holds that women and men should be paid the same wage for doing the same jobs (Goldin, 1990). Not only should male and female nurses, for example, be paid the same, but the pay of nurses should be comparable to the pay of workers in occupations that require a similar level of skills (airline pilots, perhaps). The question of how jobs are assessed in terms of skills and merit, of course, is highly problematic and has created wide disagreements about measurement and about whether the concept of comparable worth has any real meaning (England, 1992; Hutner, 1986). Presumably, implementing comparable worth would serve to increase the earnings of workers in occupations that are heavily dominated by women, which are currently undervalued.

It is of note that the earnings gap between men and women is not unique to the United States. Multinational firms in developing countries routinely pay women employees far less than men. Indeed, this is one reason why women employees are preferred (Safa, 1990). In a number of countries, mostly in the industrialized world, the earnings gap is narrower than in the United States, but this is ordinarily not the case. Although women make up 41 percent of the European workforce, on average they continue to earn considerably less than men in both the manufacturing and service sectors (Dwyer, 1996).

### **Authority**

It is obvious that women in all areas of the labor force work in jobs that not only pay less than men but in which authority is limited. In the same occu-

pational fields, women tend to be in less authoritative positions than men. What is more striking is the finding that women are underrepresented in power positions even in fields that they numerically dominate, like nursing and librarianship (Reskin and Padavic, 1994).

Moreover, even where they have entered previously male-dominated fields, women often are relegated to specific positions that are lower in prestige and income. Women in the legal profession, for example, have advanced markedly in the past two decades (Epstein, 1993). In the early 1970s, only one of every thirty-three lawyers was a woman; today nearly one of every four lawyers and nearly half of all law students are women. Yet women lawyers continue to average less in salaries than their male counterparts, and they lag in attaining partnerships in large firms (Epstein, 1996). In medicine, too, the gender gap is obvious. Women physicians are clustered in less prestigious specialties such as pediatrics and family medicine. The more prestigious and higher-paying specialties, like surgery and cardiology, remain male-dominated (Goodman, 1996).

Opportunities for women to reach authoritative positions differ from industry to industry. A study of the United States and three other industrial societies found that women were more inclined to rise to managerial positions in service industries, such as publishing, and were less likely to do so in heavy industries, such as automobiles (Clement and Myles, 1994). Industries in which women did have easier access to the top were those in which women made up the bulk of the workforce.

### *Work and the Family*

Traditionally, women have been expected to perform household duties centering on child rearing and domestic functions. Men, on the other hand, have been expected to leave the home to work, with primary responsibility for supporting the family economically and protecting its members. This traditional arrangement has been brought into question by the entrance of women—often as primary breadwinners—in significant numbers into the mainstream workforce in recent decades.

Despite the changed work role of women, the gender breakdown of traditional family roles has not changed radically. Today, although a majority of all adult women are in the labor force, women continue to do the bulk of child care and household tasks. A comparative study of Sweden and the United States found that in both countries, men did between 20 and 30 percent of housework (Wright et al., 1992). Although a majority of Americans believe that women today should work even if they are raising families, the prevailing view of “normal” gender roles still conforms to those of an earlier time. Consider how odd, even at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we would think a family in which the wife was the major breadwinner while the husband remained at home caring for the children and attending to household chores.



## **Patterns of Gender Inequality: Politics, the Corporation, and Education**

The picture of women in the labor force reveals clearly that inequality in the world of work continues to prevail, but it reveals equally clearly that traditional patterns are undergoing fundamental change. In almost every other area of social, political, and economic life, the place of women in American society is decidedly different from what it was just a short time ago. This section examines patterns of gender inequality in three major institutional realms: the political world, the corporate world, and education.

### ***Gender Inequality in the Political World***

It is extremely important to examine the extent of gender inequality and the patterns of change in the political realm because it is here that power is most evident and where many critical decisions are made regarding changes in the structure of social inequality.

**Political Participation** The United States and other modern societies have moved toward gender equality in politics only in the twentieth century. So taken for granted are equal political rights for men and women today that we often forget how thoroughly excluded women were from political participation just a short historical time ago. Not until ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920 were women nationwide able to vote. A few European countries, as well as Australia and New Zealand, had provided women's suffrage before that time, but many, such as France, Italy and Japan, did not give women the vote until the 1940s. Women's suffrage is by no means universal even today. In some Islamic countries, such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, women are still denied political participation.

**Political Leadership** Voting in elections is only a small part of effective political participation. Occupying leadership positions is infinitely more critical. To what extent have women begun to play significant political roles in the United States and other modern societies?

At the top levels of government, women have made some significant inroads, far more than in the corporate world. Looking first at electoral offices, it is clear that women have increased their numbers substantially over the past few decades. Whereas women were little more than 2 percent of the U.S. Congress in 1970, in 1998 they were more than 11 percent. One must consider these figures, of course, in light of the fact that women constitute over half the total population. Moreover, in a few countries, the contrast with the United States is sharp. For example, more than 40 percent of national parliamentary seats are held by women in Sweden, the top-ranked country in women's political representation (UNDP, 1996).

At lower levels of government, however, American women have made some truly spectacular gains in numbers and in leadership posts since the 1970s. In 1997 women occupied 21.5 percent of the nation's state legislative seats, compared to 8 percent in 1975, and they held twenty-four top legislative posts, such as Speaker of the House or Senate president (Ayres, 1997). Moreover, an increasing number of women are winning election to governorships and other statewide executive offices, as well as mayorships, city councils, and county boards.

In other spheres of government, the role of women has also begun to change significantly. There are currently two women serving on the U.S. Supreme Court (there were none before 1981), and women are being appointed to federal courts in unprecedented numbers. At the state level, in 1997 nine women were chief justices of state supreme courts and 70 out of a total of 357 state supreme court members were women. This represented a more-than-threelfold increase since 1985 (*New York Times*, 1997).

In presidential administrations through the 1970s, women were rarely members of the cabinet, the locus of greatest political influence in the executive branch of government. This began to change in the 1980s. Three women in the Reagan administration and two in the Bush administration served in the cabinet, though their positions carried relatively little political weight. In the first Clinton administration, three women were appointed to the cabinet, including the attorney general, a comparatively powerful post. In the second Clinton administration, four of the ten cabinet members were women, including, most importantly, the secretary of state, the government's top foreign policy position. Madeleine Albright's appointment as secretary of state in 1997 represented the first time a woman had ever served in that position and marked a watershed in the appointment of women to high political office. Indeed, in most countries, not only the United States, women in legislative or ministerial positions of high rank have rarely held office in the most "masculine" areas, like defense, foreign policy, or finance (Peterson and Runyan, 1993).

Finally, the possibility of a female American president is no longer as remote as it had seemed in previous eras. Geraldine Ferraro was nominated as the Democratic candidate for the vice presidency in 1984, and as women continue to play a more significant political role, achieving the highest office is an inevitability. Public opinion polls indicate the increasing public acceptance of this occurrence. Almost 90 percent say they would vote for a qualified woman for president (Hastings and Hastings, 1996). A few women have already achieved the highest offices of their country's government, including, in recent decades, the prime ministers of Israel, India, Great Britain, Pakistan, and France.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Peterson and Runyan (1993) note that women who have held the highest-ranking office of government are typically perceived as exceptional women, who act "like men."

### ***Gender Inequality in the Corporate World***

In the world of work, women generally occupy fewer positions of authority, but their specific place in the corporate world, especially in posts at the top, presents a mixed picture. On the one hand, women, as already noted, continue to be severely underrepresented in top managerial positions. Moreover, the wage gap is as evident here as it is in the general workforce. On the other hand, when looked at in historical perspective, women have made substantial gains in recent decades and they continue to advance into power positions at an increasing rate.

Until the last ten or so years, women were scarcely present in top-ranking posts of the corporate world. In the mid-1970s women as a proportion of the boards of directors of the 250 largest corporations constituted only 1.8 percent (Herman, 1981; Robertson, 1973). Little change had been evident by 1980, when only 36 of the 1,499 top positions in the 100 largest corporations were filled by women (Dye and Strickland, 1982). In addition, most of those few women were recruited from outside the corporate world, leading to speculation that they were serving as "window dressing." A 1996 study found that 10 percent of the most senior jobs at the 500 largest U.S. companies were held by women, and at the very highest levels—CEO, president, executive vice president—2.4 percent were women (Himelstein, 1996). From a negative perspective these are still very low figures, but from a more positive perspective they represent a significant change in just a few years.

The question of why women continue to lag in their achievement of the highest corporate posts is not easily answered. As with the wage gap, some point to a continuation of sexist attitudes and blatant discrimination. Others explain it as a more subtle reluctance of male executives to accept women or ethnic minorities into a clubby environment in which these men feel comfortable with each other (Zweigenhaft, 1987).

A number of other explanations have been offered. Dye (1995) lists a few of these:

- Women are not aggressive in corporate politics.
- Women have lower expectations of earnings and positions.
- Because women must take time to have children, they fall further behind men in the competition for top positions.
- Affirmative action has helped women to secure more entry-level positions but has not had the same impact at the senior managerial level.
- Women choose staff assignments rather than fast-track, operating-head assignments.
- Women are more reluctant to change locations than are men and thus miss out on opportunities and are less valuable to the corporation.



Source: *Washington Post* National Weekly Edition, April 20, 1998, p. 9. Kirk Anderson. Reprinted by permission.

In addition, most women advance through corporate divisions that are traditionally "female" (such as human resources, community relations, or legal), which rarely lead to positions at the very top (Ghiloni, 1987; Himelstein, 1996; Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

A survey of 461 women executives of Fortune 1,000 companies found that male stereotyping and preconceptions of women continue to act as barriers to advancement at the top of the corporate world. The respondents in this study claimed that the most important factor in their own success was having consistently exceeded performance expectations—that is, they had to be not only good but exceptionally good. The second most important factor was adjusting their personal style so as not to appear threatening to male executives. This is quite different from the view of a majority of male executives who explained the low numbers for women at the top as a result of simply not having been on the executive trajectory long enough; eventually, in this view, women will catch up (Grimsley, 1996; Dobrzynski, 1996).

The relatively low rate of participation of women at the topmost levels of the corporate world, however, must be considered in the context of change. Clearly, women are playing a continually more significant role, and the rate of change is relatively rapid. In 1996, for example, for the first time women

made up more than 10 percent of the boards of directors of the 500 largest U.S. companies (Dobrzynski, 1996). Also, in 1997, for the first time a woman was named chief executive officer of a Fortune 500 company. And despite their diminutive numbers, women corporate officers increased by 33 percent between 1994 and 1995 (Himelstein, 1996). Companies are beginning to establish goals for placing more women in executive positions, some even creating quotas mandating minimum numbers of women in the senior ranks (Himelstein, 1997).

Although American women are still severely underrepresented in the highest posts of the corporate world, their progress toward the top is actually more significant than that of women in most countries of the world, including European societies. Despite the protection of equal-opportunity laws, European women are not moving into middle and senior management jobs as quickly as American women, and the percentage of women on corporate boards is far below that of the United States (Dwyer, 1996).

Dye and Strickland concluded in 1982 that "The major institutions of U.S. society are managed and directed almost exclusively by men" (340). Clearly, that is no longer the case. Nonetheless, it remains equally evident that women have far to go before they achieve parity with men in both the political and the corporate worlds.

### *Women and Education*

Much of the explanation for the rapidly changing status of women in politics and the economy can be attributed to the changes in education that women have experienced over the past few decades. As discussed in Chapter 5, the key to entrance into the society's power elites today is access to higher education. And as women secure more education, their political and economic status has changed concomitantly.

Consider the number and percentage of women in higher education today compared to forty years ago. Whereas in 1960 almost twice as many males than females attended college, by 1980 females were a majority of college attendees. In 1995, of the 14.7 million students enrolled in college, 8 million were women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997d). As is seen in Table 12-3, more women than men today earn bachelor's and master's degrees. Also significant is the marked change in the number and percentage of women earning doctoral and professional degrees.

Although the increase in higher education for women vis-à-vis men is clear and dramatic, the types of degrees they earn continue to be sex-typed. In 1993, while women were awarded almost 90 percent of undergraduate degrees in library science and home economics and 78 percent of undergraduate education degrees, they earned only 16 percent of undergraduate engineering degrees. Nonetheless, even here there have been marked changes. In 1970 women earned only one out of one hundred engineering degrees (Bianchi and Spain, 1996).

**Table 12-3 ■ Degrees Earned, by Level and Sex (in thousands)**

Degree	1960		1970		1980		1990		1995		2000*	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Bachelor's	254	138	451	341	474	456	492	560	526	634	539	652
Master's	51	24	126	83	151	147	154	171	179	219	208	220
First professional	NA	NA	33	2	53	17	44	27	45	31	50	34
Doctorate	9	1	26	4	23	10	24	14	27	18	28	19

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 1997*, Table 303; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Degrees and Other Awards Conferred by Institutions of Higher Learning: 1994-95*.

\* Projected.

It is of note that the educational level of women in elite positions is even higher than their male counterparts'. Dye's study of top institutional leaders in the United States (1995) showed that nearly half of the women leaders had earned master's or doctorate degrees and another quarter held law degrees. As Dye explains, "This strongly suggests that women need more education than men to compete effectively for top posts" (1995:185).

### **The Status of Women in Global Perspective**

Although the general pattern of gender stratification in the United States is similar in other societies, the degree of women's subordinate status and the discrimination they encounter are far more severe, particularly in countries of the developing world.

#### ***Discrimination and Abuse***

Despite the progress that women in the United States and other industrial societies have made in the past three decades in securing political rights and economic power, discrimination in the workplace is by no means a thing of the past. Moreover, in the realm of interpersonal relations, problems of harassment and physical abuse, sexual and otherwise, continue to be serious issues. Still, in looking at the status of women in a global context, the forms and degree of discrimination that American women face appear mild. In comparing their status with women in most of the remainder of the world, it could be argued that American women are an extremely privileged female population.

**Women in the Developing World** In many developing societies, female subordination is especially harsh. Women in these societies continue to be treated in a fashion that would bewilder—and anger—most Americans. Bride burnings remain widespread today in India, for example, and rape is almost commonplace in South Africa (MacFarquhar, 1994a, 1994b). These are by no means extraordinary situations, as the vignettes at the outset of this chapter suggested. Much of the discrimination against women in these societies not only is based on tradition but is built into the legal structure. Consider that there are laws in some countries that prohibit women from traveling abroad without male permission. In other countries women are under the legal guardianship of their husbands and have no property rights (United Nations, 1995).

Consider the status of women in Brazil. A national study in 1992 reported an average of 337 assaults on women daily. Because male police rarely treated wife-beating as more than a domestic matter, in 1985 a number of women's police stations were established. Despite this measure, as well as laws that address the issue of discrimination and violence against women, in practice the penalties for such actions are relatively mild and ineffective (Robinson

and Epstein, 1994). Anthropologist Richard Parker (1991) studied the Brazilian sexual culture and concluded that "The social, political, and economic institutions that work together to minimize the opportunities for choice and self-determination on the part of women from all walks of life in Brazil continue to function with ruthless efficiency" (169). The fact that some changes have begun to take place among the most privileged sectors of Brazilian society, Parker notes, should not be seen as indicative of a decline of oppression for the vast majority of Brazilian women. Brazil remains "a profoundly patriarchal social order" (170).

The circumstances of women in some Muslim societies of the Middle East are particularly arresting (Erturk, 1991). Women have virtually no political rights, they are not encouraged to enter the workforce but are expected to remain at home, they must cover their faces when they appear in public, and they remain strictly segregated from men in schools, mosques, and other social settings. Marriages are prearranged, and women may have no right to refuse the choice of a partner. Moreover, although it is not common, Islamic law permits men to have as many as four wives.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of women's subordination in the developing world is the widespread practice of female circumcision in at least twenty-eight African societies (Abusharaf, 1998). This involves the ritual excision of some or all of the female external genitalia (the clitoris, and small and large genital lips), resulting in diminished ability to experience sexual pleasure (Dugger, 1996). The procedure is usually performed on girls in their teens or younger and is done to assure their virginity for their future husbands. The cutting is ordinarily done in a crude fashion with a knife, razor blade, or broken bottle, using no anesthetic, and often results in serious health problems including hemorrhaging, infection, problems during childbirth, and even death.

Female circumcision, or genital mutilation, has come under attack in recent years from various sources, including governments and human rights groups. However, it is firmly entrenched in the culture of these societies, making change slow and difficult. Families insist on having female children circumcised since the honor of the girl and the family dictates it. Social pressures can be so great that some wives who have not been cut as children will choose to have the operation performed on them as adults (Abusharaf, 1998). Even when there is objection, cultural norms may prevail. In Ivory Coast, for example, the wife of a father who insists on having his daughter circumcised says that she despises the practice. Yet she admits that "It is up to my husband. We live in Africa. The man makes the decisions about the children" (Dugger, 1996). Many of the girls themselves look forward to the cutting, understanding that the rite represents an entry into

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<sup>6</sup>It is important to note that there are major differences among Muslim societies regarding women's rights.



adulthood and makes them desirable marriage partners. In Sudan, 90 percent of women have been cut, and in Mali, 93 percent (Dugger, 1996).

Many of the societal norms of traditional societies that support what Americans would consider oppressive conditions for women are being challenged and changed. For example, in Qatar, a small Persian Gulf country strongly ruled by Islamic principles, an increasing number of women are going to college and then to work, some even with men, and some now drive cars of their own. Most no longer tolerate being one among several wives and strongly endorse the right of women to refuse a marriage proposal, something that was not acceptable just a few years earlier. Women have also been promised the right to vote (Jehl, 1997).

Nonetheless, change is coming piecemeal and only gradually. To the surprise of many Westerners, women themselves in these societies do not necessarily advocate quick and thorough change in their circumstances. This may reflect not only the perceived need to proceed slowly with what are radical social and political changes but also a commitment to traditional cultural ways. Recall the practice of female circumcision in Central Africa, which continues to be condoned and even desired by many women. In Qatar, much the same attitude toward change in women's roles is evident. "I think in our society we should cover our faces," says a twenty-six-year-old clerical worker who also wears a head scarf and a cloak that covers her entire body. She acknowledges that when she travels to Europe or the United States, she does not cover herself, but she believes there remain lines in Qatar that should not be crossed. Another working Qatari woman, a bank manager who was among the first women in the country to drive and to work with men, expresses the view that "It's part of our religion." Working and studying is accepted, she added, "but going to mixed parties and having contact with foreign men—these things cannot be done" (Jehl, 1997:A7).

**Japanese Society** Japan presents an interesting comparison with American society in gender stratification. It is not a developing society, but rather one that rivals the United States in economic prosperity and productivity. Yet the place of women in Japan could not present a stronger contrast. "Japanese men are blatantly male chauvinists," wrote the noted Japan scholar Edwin Reischauer, "and women seem shamefully exploited and suppressed" (1988:175).

To begin with, until quite recently Japanese women were not a significant portion of the labor force. Today, however, about half of all Japanese women are employed, and they make up 40 percent of workers (Pollack, 1997). In the past, Japanese working women were rarely found in other than menial, often part-time, jobs and they continue to be concentrated in low-status positions. The glass ceiling blocking the movement of women into managerial positions is far more implacable than in the United States. What's more, once Japanese women workers marry or become pregnant, they are expected to

quit their jobs (Xuewen et al., 1992). Thus, women workers have not been able to benefit from Japan's tradition of lifetime employment.

Sexual discrimination against women in Japan is, by American standards, blatant. In want-ads, companies often specify the sex of employees they seek and set an age limit for women applicants. In the workplace, women are commonly relegated to subservient roles, such as pouring tea for male colleagues (Pollack, 1996). Many Japanese women are hired in electronics assembly plants, where work is considered a more natural female setting. Very few women work in automobile factories, however. This contrasts with the workforce composition of Japanese firms in their U.S. plants. About 20 percent of workers at Nissan's plant in Tennessee and 30 percent of workers at Honda's plants in Ohio are women (Pollack, 1997). Not surprisingly, there is a wide earnings gap between Japanese men and Japanese women; women earn about 60 percent of men's income (recall that the comparable U.S. percentage is about 75).

Some of these conditions are undergoing slow but gradual change. Antidiscrimination laws have recently been enacted in Japan, requiring companies to provide equal opportunities for men and women. Also, the ban on women working at night has been lifted, opening up new job opportunities (Pollack, 1997).

If the place of women in the workforce seems harsh by American standards, the family provides no haven. Japanese families have traditionally been notoriously patriarchal, with women playing a mainly perfunctory role. As one Japanese husband put it, referring to his wife, "She's like air or water. You couldn't live without it, but most of the time, you're not conscious of its existence" (Kristof, 1996a). Traditionally, women have had virtually no social life outside the family, in contrast to their husbands, who usually spend much time with their co-workers (Reischauer, 1988).

Another view of Japanese women in the family, however, suggests that they are not as powerless as is often assumed. Although formally they may be subservient to their husbands, Japanese women are strongly influential within the family, though often in a behind-the-scenes manner (Kato, 1989).

Japanese marriages are consummated not so much on the basis of love and high expectations as on duty and children. This, in combination with the social pressures on women to make adjustments to an unhappy relationship, has resulted in a comparatively low rate of divorce. Also, the severe economic and social hardship that women encounter following a marital breakup serves as an additional disincentive to divorce (Vogel, 1979).

### *Women and Power*

The gender patterns in the United States with regard to political and economic elites are very much the same in other comparable societies: The number and percentage of women in positions of power are disproportionately small, and they are advancing at a slow pace. Sociologist Gwen Moore (1988) found, for example, that the small number of women in elite positions

Table 12-4 ■ Positions Held by Women (percentages)

Country <sup>1</sup>	Seats Held in Parliament	Administrators and Managers	Professional and Technical Workers
Norway (1)	39.4	30.9	57.5
Sweden (2)	40.4	38.9	64.4
Canada (6)	19.3	42.2	56.1
United States (7)	11.2	42.0	52.7
Germany (9)	25.5	19.2	43.0
Australia (11)	20.5	43.3	25.0
Italy (16)	10.0	37.6	46.3
Cuba (23)	22.8	18.5	47.8
China (28)	21.0	11.6	45.1
Israel (30)	7.5	18.7	54.1
Mexico (31)	13.9	20.0	43.6
Japan (34)	7.7	8.5	41.8
France (40)	6.1	9.4	41.4
Brazil (58)	6.7	17.3	57.2
Indonesia (59)	12.6	6.6	40.8
Cameroon (65)	12.2	10.1	24.4
Korea (73)	3.0	4.2	45.0
Egypt (75)	2.0	16.0	28.7
Iran (81)	4.0	3.5	32.6
India (86)	7.3	2.3	20.5

Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Human Development Report 1997* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 152–154.

<sup>1</sup>The countries are arranged in the order of their “gender empowerment measure,” an index developed by the United Nations Development Programme to measure gender inequality in key areas of economic and political participation and decision making in 94 countries. Each country’s rank is shown in parentheses beside its name.

in various societal institutions was similar in the United States, West Germany, and Australia. Also, women were found to be peripheral to the informal elite networks that are critical in leading to higher decision-making positions.

Table 12-4 shows the role of women in political and economic life in a range of contemporary societies. What is indicated is the percentage of powerful and prestigious political and occupational positions held by women. A strong relation is evident between the degree of economic development of the country and the percentage of women in important roles. With few exceptions, women in highly developed, industrialized countries occupy comparatively signifi-

cant percentages of parliamentary seats, managerial and administrative posts, and professional and technical jobs. These percentages taper off sharply as the level of development drops.

## The Feminist Movement

In every society today there is an active movement seeking to change the structure of gender stratification. And it is quite obvious that everywhere change is, in fact, occurring, albeit at noticeably different rates. Consider again the incidents described at the outset of this chapter, for example, in light of the changes that have been prompted by a global feminist movement. The routine abuse of women, as in Punsoolri, is no longer accepted as the norm, even in rural South Korea. The restrictions imposed on women by the Taliban in Afghanistan have been recognized as exceedingly repressive even in the Muslim world. And the laws pertaining to rape in Peru are being fought by advocates of women's rights.

In the United States and in other Western industrial societies, women as a collectivity start from a more advanced position and thus the focus of the feminist movement in these countries has fallen more on securing equal political and economic opportunities rather than on preventing women's physical and mental abuse. But in all cases the objective in a broad sense is the same: the advancement of the status of women.

### *Feminism*

The set of beliefs and actions that center on assuring the equality of men and women in various areas of social life is referred to as **feminism**. It is important to consider in the context of human social development how radically new is the idea of gender equality. Although the sexist ideology has been successfully challenged in the past several decades, for most of human history the notion that men were intellectually as well as physically superior to women was taken for granted. Thus, thoughts of gender equality were always outside the mainstream. Until the past few decades, the sexist ideology was, like beliefs regarding racial superiority, the accepted view among the overwhelming majority of people.

**The Feminist Movement in the United States** Although the contemporary phase of the U.S. feminist movement stems from around 1960, an earlier movement began in the mid-nineteenth century and continued for over seven decades. The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 marks a point at which women began to mobilize against discrimination in education and politics. The most important objective was the franchise, which was finally secured in 1920 with passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Following the attainment of its major goal, the early feminist movement receded and did not experience a revival until the 1960s.

During the 1960s, a number of factors came together to give momentum to a resurgent feminist movement. First, a book of seminal importance was published, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), whose message instilled a new consciousness among many women. Friedan spoke of an inchoate problem in which women of the post-World War II generation, despite their increasing prosperity, felt unfulfilled. As she put it, "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home'" (32).

Second, women piggybacked onto the civil rights movement of the 1960s, calling attention to the fact that, as a collectivity, they too were targets of blatant as well as subtle forms of discrimination. The civil rights movement provided a model for organizing and political action, and it was at this point that women were increasingly acknowledged as a sociological minority (Freeman, 1975).

A third factor concerns changes in women's reproductive rights. This took two forms. One was the introduction of birth control pills, which provided women with greater options regarding issues of childbearing. Another was the legalization of abortion in 1973, which provided further control over reproductive issues. Prior to this time, unwanted pregnancies were either carried to term or were aborted surreptitiously. These medical and legal innovations led to monumental changes in the role of women in the family and ultimately in the workforce.

### *The Feminist Ideological Spectrum*

The current feminist movement is a complex array of organizations, individuals, and ideologies that is difficult to define with clarity. The very meaning of feminism today is subject to different definitions among different women. Sociologists Myra Marx Ferree and Beth Hess (1994) suggest that there are a few basic premises that, together, characterize a "feminist worldview":

- A claim that women are a special category of people based on biological features and cultural experiences.
- The belief that only women should define what is feminine.
- Recognition of and dissatisfaction with the fact that men create rules that women must live by.
- The belief that changing the subordinate status of women is possible and essential.

The feminist movement today encompasses a number of branches that maintain somewhat different agendas and, at times, conflicting objectives. Within these branches are further divisions, making it difficult to conveniently lump together into a few units the various perspectives. For our purposes (and at the risk of oversimplification), however, the spectrum can be roughly divided into two camps: *gender feminism* and *equity feminism*.

**Equity Feminism** Gender neutrality may be seen as the basic goal of equity feminism or what Judith Lorber (1998) has called gender reform feminism. The focus of the efforts of equity feminists is the attainment of equal rights and opportunities for women in all areas of social and economic life (Kaminer, 1996; Wolf, 1994). As Christine Sommers (1995) describes her, an equity feminist "wants for women what she wants for everyone: fair treatment without discrimination" (22).

Equity feminism might be seen as mainstream feminism, embraced by a broad social spectrum. The target of the movement from this perspective is the reform of various societal institutions that continue to discriminate against women. Strong emphasis is placed on changing the workplace, where gender segregation remains prevalent, women's wages remain low, and a glass ceiling continues to bar women's entry into power positions. Though liberal feminists predominate among this branch of the movement, it also includes those who approach feminism from socialist and Marxist positions.

**Gender Feminism** Gender feminism begins from the position that society is fundamentally patriarchal. All institutions—the school, the economy, the polity, religion—are dominated by men, and their dominance is supported by a gender ideology. In this view, men use various means, including aggression and violence, to maintain their societal power. Lorber (1998) refers to this branch of feminism as gender resistance feminism.

Gender neutrality, from this perspective, is not a meaningful goal since the domination of men is so comprehensive. The objectives, therefore, are to develop woman-centered institutions that speak to the unique needs and values of women (Lorber, 1998). Also sought are changes in the legal system to provide women with protection against a system that is viewed as discriminatory against women in its very essence. The view is that women are under attack and that the gains of the past couple of decades are threatened (Faludi, 1991).

Even within this branch of feminism there are divisions. At one extreme, for example, are radical feminists, who see men unavoidably as victimizers of women. Sexual harassment of women is defined very broadly so that almost any form of sex might qualify as male sexual exploitation (Dworkin, 1987; MacKinnon, 1993).

Gender feminism is prevalent among academicians and many feminist philosophers and leaders. Yet, as Sommers (1995) suggests, it "lacks a grass roots constituency" (22). That is, few women outside the university have subscribed to its version of feminist goals or to its victimization view of women's social status.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Lorber (1998) identifies a third major feminist perspective, gender rebellion feminism, which draws from postmodernism and emphasizes the connections between various forms of stratification (race, class, gender).

The majority of American women today do not consider themselves part of an organized feminist movement, regardless of its branch, and some may even speak disparagingly of it, but nonetheless, they favor unquestioningly the basic goals of the movement: equality for women in various facets of social, economic, and political life. In sociologist Lillian Rubin's interviews of working-class women, she found such ambiguity in their responses to the notion of feminism. On the one hand, they saw feminists stereotypically as overly aggressive, demanding, and not sufficiently feminine. "I'd never be a feminist," explained a mother working as an insurance company claims adjuster, "because they want women to give up being feminine and soft." But on specific issues, like pay equity, sexual harassment, or women in politics, they voiced decidedly feminist opinions. The same woman who earlier said she would never be a feminist recognizes the significance of the movement in opening up occupational opportunities for women that previously didn't exist. "Yeah, I'm glad it [the women's movement] happened because otherwise I wouldn't have my job. My company didn't used to hire women to be adjusters before that" (Rubin 1994:73).

## Summary

Sex refers to the relatively fixed physiological and biological differences between men and women; gender refers to differences that are determined socially and culturally and that are manifest in the different roles played by men and women in all societies. The question of whether gender identity and gender roles are biologically rooted or are socially determined is a debatable issue, but the prevailing social science position strongly favors the latter.

Gender stratification is evident in all societies. The gender hierarchy is almost always one in which women are the subordinate stratum. The ideology of sexism holds that male and female differences are biological in origin and not subject to change. This belief, reinforced by a set of stereotypes, has traditionally helped to rationalize and stabilize male dominance.

Women have entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers in the past several decades, but they remain heavily concentrated in certain occupations, generally earn less than men, and do not often occupy positions of authority. Nevertheless, legal and traditional impediments to occupational mobility have been reduced enormously in the past several decades, and significant changes continue to occur in the status of women. In certain areas, namely education and the professions, change has come quite rapidly. In politics and the corporate world, the rate has been slower but gradual nonetheless. Women have begun to enter lower and middle managerial positions in greater numbers, but it is at the uppermost echelons that societal power remains overwhelmingly male.

Women in the developing world and even in some societies of the developed world experience a level of subordination that is far more profound and consequential than in the United States and most other Western industrial societies. In all societies, an active feminist movement seeks changes in the structure of gender stratification.

The feminist movement in the United States experienced a resurgence beginning in the 1960s, stimulating the push for women's rights and socioeconomic equality during the past thirty years. Although the feminist ideological spectrum is broad and complex, it can be roughly broken down into two very general perspectives, equity feminism and gender feminism.