n this chapter, we will review three additional bases of inequality: sex and gender, sexual orientation, and age. Each inequality is the basis for a form of prejudice and or discrimination. Sexism refers to prejudice or discrimination based solely on someone’s sex. Although sexism has come to refer to negative beliefs and actions directed toward women, men can also be subject to sexism. Heterosexism is the privileging of heterosexuality over homosexuality in society. Heterosexism includes individual attitudes (nearly 60 percent of U.S. adults would support a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as occurring only between a man and a woman; CBS News/New York Times 2004) and institutional forms of discrimination (gay or lesbian partners are routinely excluded from health insurance policies). Age also serves as a basis of prejudice or discrimination. Ageism is defined by Robert Butler (1969) as the “systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender” (p. 243). We begin first with a look at inequalities based on gender.

**Inequalities Based on Gender**

What is the basis of gender inequality? Some may argue that there are fundamental differences between males and females, based on fixed physiological differences or our sex. Yes, there are biological differences—our sexual organs, our hormones, and other physiological aspects—that are relatively fixed at birth (Marger 2002), but more than that makes us unequal. Sociologists focus on the differences determined by our society and our culture, our gender. Although we are born male and female, we must
understand and learn masculine or feminine behaviors (Marger 2002). Gender serves to legitimate certain activities and ways of thinking over others; it grants privilege to one group over another (Tickner 2002). Many sociological theories have been offered to explain the differences between women and men, focusing primarily on the inequalities evident in educational attainment, income, and employment. In each area, research and data confirm how women are subordinated to men (for more discussion, refer to Chapter 5, Education, and Chapter 6, The Workplace).

Let's consider the history of women in the U.S. Senate. In the 214-year history of the U.S. Senate, only 33 women have been elected or appointed as members. The first woman senator was Rebecca Latimer Felton, sworn into office on November 21, 1922. The Georgia senator was appointed to fill a vacancy and served only for two days. In the early 1990s, there were only two women senators. In 1992, Patty Murray, from my home state of Washington, was the first elected female senator to have young children at home during her term (Stolberg 2003). But by 2002, there were 14 women senators. Four senators were working moms with young or school-age children.

There is nothing automatic at birth that makes men more suited to become senators than women. Sociologists have examined how girls and boys are subject to differential gender socialization from birth. Traditional gender role stereotypes are reinforced through the family, school, peers, and the media with images of what is appropriate behavior for girls and boys. This includes defining appropriate occupations for women versus men.

Boys are exposed to images and models of “masculine” occupations such as firefighters, attorneys, and even politicians. Our educational system directs and encourages boys to pursue studies in math, science, and engineering. In contrast, girls are directed to “feminine” service or helping professions, such as nursing or teaching. Despite educational and occupational gains made by women, women continue to dominate traditional female occupations: secretaries (96.3 percent are women), receptionists (93.2 percent), registered nurses (90.2 percent) and preschool teachers (98.3 percent) (U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 2003). Fourteen women senators out of 100 U.S. senators make only 14 percent. (In contrast, Iraq's temporary constitution adopted in 2004 required that 25 percent of the seats in the national assembly must be filled by women. Yet, equal rights for Iraqi women regarding marriage and inheritance were not guaranteed by the constitution.) Although women have been in the labor force for many years, women and men still work at different jobs.

Functionalists may argue that it is appropriate for men, not women, to pursue political office because it is more practical or natural for men to be in leadership positions. It must be the correct arrangement because it is how it has always been done. In fact, women may contemplate certain occupations believing that the type of work is compatible with their gender. However, conflict and feminist theorists identify how our social and political structures are created to maintain the dominance of men. Sexism or discrimination may be an individual act, but it can also become institutionalized in our organizations or through laws and common practices. Sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) identified how business corporations have a hidden gender structure: functioning, but unwritten rules about what positions can be occupied by women and how many women should be employed in the corporation.
Organizations implicitly or explicitly withhold support from their female employees in the form of training, promotion, or wages. Even if men and women have similar jobs within a company, men usually have more income and authority than women (Beeghley 2005).

One could argue that the U.S. Senate is a patriarchal system, dominated and maintained by men. Something that we take for granted, such as a bathroom, can be considered as evidence of subordination or exclusion. For example, for many years, there was no women’s restroom in the Senate Chambers. The nearest available restroom was on the first floor, along with the public restrooms. Women senators had to “schlep downstairs and stand in line with the tourists” (Collins 1993:93). It was not until 1993 that female senators had their own bathroom located outside the Senate Chamber, next to the restroom for male senators. To make room for the facility, the existing men’s restroom was remodeled into two separate restrooms. When the restroom was built, Eleanor Smeal, president of the Fund of the Feminist Majority, declared, “[This] signifies the end of one of the last all-male bastions in the country that has real power” (Picker 1993).

As interactionists explain, many social values and meanings are expressed in our language. As more women are elected to public office, our language has changed. The state legislatures in New York, Rhode Island, and Utah are revising their constitutions to gender-neutral language, eliminating the exclusive use of he or him. Such sexist language only accentuates the dominance of men in political affairs; however, the usage of she or they may reinforce and encourage the increasing participation of women in politics. Sandy Galef, an assemblywoman who led the drive to revise New York’s state constitution, explained, “These constitutions were written about men because that was the history of our country. But that’s not the history anymore” (“Some States” 2003:A28).

**Policy Focus—Title IX**

Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 prohibits the exclusion of any person from participation in an educational program or the denial of benefits based on one’s sex (Woodhouse 2002). The preamble to Title IX states, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any educational programs or activity receiving federal financial assistance.” In particular, the law requires that members of both sexes have equal opportunities to participate in sports and enjoy the benefits of competitive athletics (National Women’s Law Center 2002b).

**Voices in the Community:**

**Bernice R. Sandler**

In this feature, Bernice Sandler (1997), the woman behind Title IX, explains how she was transformed into a voice of change.
The year was 1969. I had been teaching part-time at the University of Maryland for several years during the time that I worked on my doctorate and shortly after I finished it. There were seven openings in the department, and I have just asked a fellow faculty member and friend why I was not considered for any of the openings. My qualifications were excellent, "But let’s face it," he said, "You come on too strong for a woman." . . . I had no idea that this rejection would not only change my life but would ultimately change the lives of millions of women and girls because it triggered a series of events that would lead to the passage of Title IX. . . .

Although sex discrimination was illegal in certain circumstances, I quickly discovered that none of the laws prohibiting discrimination covered sex discrimination in education. I turned to the civil rights movement to see what African Americans had done to break down segregated school systems and employment discrimination, with the hope of learning what might be applicable to women’s issues. I discovered a presidential Executive Order prohibiting federal contractors from discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion and national origin that had been amended by President Johnson, effective October 13, 1968, to include discrimination based on sex. This discovery meant that there was a legal route to combat sex discrimination on campuses that held federal contracts.

The Director of the Office of Federal Contract Compliance at the Department of Labor, Vincent Macaluso, had been waiting for someone to use the Executive Order in regard to sex discrimination. Together we planned the first complaint against universities and colleges, and the strategies to bring about enforcement of the Executive Order.

Two months later under the auspices of the Women’s Equity Action League (WEAL), I began what quickly became a national campaign to end discrimination in education and eventually culminated in the passage of Title IX. One January 31, 1970, WEAL filed a historic class action complaint against all universities and colleges in the country with specific charges against the University of Maryland. . . . During the next two years, I filed charges against approximately 250 institutions. Another 100 or so were filed by other individuals and organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW); in tandem with these administrative charges, we began a massive letter-writing campaign to members of Congress. . . .

Rep. Edith Green (OR), . . . chair of the subcommittee that dealt with higher education, agreed to hold Congressional hearings in June and July of 1970 on education and employment of women. It was a time when there were virtually no books and only a few articles that addressed the issue of discrimination against women in education. There was little research or data, and barely a handful of unnoticed women’s studies courses. There were no campus commissions on the status of women and only a few institutions had even begun to examine the status of women on their campus. . . .

In the spring of 1972, two years after the hearings, a portion of Rep. Green’s original bill became law when Title VII of the Civil Rights Act was amended by Congress to cover all employees in educational institutions. Initially, Rep. Green had also sought to amend Title VI of the Civil Rights Act to include sex discrimination. However, at the urging of African-American leaders and others, who were worried that opening Title VI for amendment could weaken its coverage, she proposed a separate and new title, which became Title IX. . . . On June 23, 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, was passed by Congress and on July 1, was signed into law by President Richard Nixon. . . .

The words “too strong for a woman” turned me into a feminist. At that time, I had no legal, political or organizing experience. I was also extraordinarily naïve; I believed that if we passed Title IX, it would only take a year or two for all the inequalities based on sex to be eliminated. Eventually, I realized that the women’s movement was trying not simply
to pass a piece of legislation, but to alter strongly embedded gender patterns of behavior and belief. To change all that would take masses of strong women and more than my lifetime to accomplish.

According to Title IX, schools are required to offer women and men equal opportunities to participate in athletics. This can be done in one of three ways: Schools demonstrate that the percentage of male and female athletes is about the same as the percentage of male and female students enrolled (also referred to as the “proportionality rule”), or the school has a history and a continuing practice of expanding opportunities for female students, or the school is fully and effectively meeting its female students’ interests and abilities to participate in sports. In addition, schools must equitably allocate athletic scholarships. The overall share of financial aid going to female athletes should be the same as the percentage of female athletes participating in their athletic program. Finally, schools must treat men and women equally in all aspects of sports programming. This requirement applies to supplies and equipment, the scheduling of games and practices, financial support for travel, and the assignment and compensation of coaches (National Women’s Law Center 2002a).

The law has been widely credited with increasing women’s participation in high school and collegiate sports and also for women’s achievement in education. In 1997, data released by the U.S. Department of Education revealed the successes of Title IX after 25 years. In 1995, 37 percent of collegiate athletes were women, compared to 15 percent in 1972. In 1996, girls represented 39 percent of all high school athletes compared with only 7.5 percent in 1971 (U.S. Department of Education 1997). Today more than 150,000 women participate in college sports, and about 3 million girls participate in high school sports (Garber 2002). In 1994, 63 percent of female high school graduates were enrolled in college, an increase from 43 percent in 1973. About 18 percent of women and 26 percent of men had completed four or more years of college in 1971 (U.S. Department of Education 1997). In 2002, 24.1 percent of men and 21.9 percent of women had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau 2002).

After more than 30 years, the controversy over Title IX continues. Many blame Title IX for the demise of some 400 collegiate men’s programs. To achieve proportionality between the number of male and female athletes, schools have reduced the number of male athletes in minor sport programs such as wrestling, gymnastics, golf, and tennis (Garber 2002). In 2002, the National Wrestling Coaches Association filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Education, claiming that by enforcing Title IX, the department was practicing sexual discrimination against men. In June 2003, a federal judge threw out the lawsuit, ruling that the coaches did not have standing to bring the lawsuit.

There is also evidence that not all colleges and universities are complying with the law. Although women in Division I colleges represent more than half the student body, women’s sports receive only 43 percent of athletic scholarships, 32 percent of recruiting funds, and 36 percent of operating budgets (National Women’s Law Center 2002a). Most surveyed Americans, about 70 percent, think Title IX should be strengthened or left alone (Brady 2003).
In June 2002, Secretary of Education Rod Paige announced the formation of the Commission on Opportunity in Athletics. Paige directed the 14-member commission to identify improvements in how Title IX is implemented. In January 2003, the Commission on Opportunity in Athletics reviewed Title IX and recommended several changes. In general, the Commission endorsed recommendations that would give schools more latitude in identifying athletic opportunities and scholarships. The Commission deadlocked on a proposal to allow schools to allocate 43 percent of slots on varsity sports teams for women, although women make up 55.5 percent of college enrollments (Fletcher and Sandoval 2003). Department of Education officials confirm that they will retain Title IX enforcement, keeping the proportionality rule, but they will also begin emphasizing the other ways schools can meet the law through demonstrating a pattern of expanding opportunities for women or by proving the sports interests of women have been met (Associated Press 2003).

Investigate how Title IX is administered in your college or university. How many male and female athletes are at your university? How many programs for each? Have any programs been cut as a result of Title IX requirements? Interview coaches, athletes, and administrators on their view of Title IX: Has it made a difference for students and athletes at your school?

**PUTTING IT TOGETHER:**

On your campus.

---

**Inequalities Based on Sexual Orientation**

One’s sexual orientation also serves as a basis of inequality. **Sexual orientation** is defined as the classification of individuals according to their preference for emotional-sexual relationships and lifestyle with persons of the same sex (**homosexuality**) or persons of the opposite sex (**heterosexuality**). **Bisexuality** refers to emotional and sexual attractions to persons of either sex.

There is no definitive study on the number of individuals who identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual. The study that is most often cited is one conducted in 1994 by Robert Michael and his colleagues (1994). Based on a random survey of 3,432 U.S. adults age 18 to 59 years, Michael et al. found that 2.8 percent of males and 1.4 percent of females thought of themselves as homosexual or bisexual. About 5 percent of surveyed males and 4 percent of females said they had had sex with someone of the same gender after they turned 18. About 6 percent of males and 4 percent of females reported that they were sexually attracted to someone of the same gender.

In our society, no one gets “outed” for being straight. There is little controversy in identifying someone as heterosexual. Socially, culturally, and legally, the heterosexual life style is promoted and praised. Although homosexuality has existed in most societies, it has usually been attached to a negative label—abnormal, sinful, or inappropriate. A socially determined prejudice, **homophobia**, is an irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuals (Lehne 1995). Homophobia is particularly directed...
at gay men. Bisexual or homosexual men, women, and their families are subject to
social inequalities through practices of discrimination and prejudice, many of them
surprisingly institutionalized in formal law.

Sodomy laws criminalize oral and anal sex between two adults. Although the laws
may apply to homosexuals and heterosexuals, sodomy laws are more vigorously
applied against same-sex partners. Thirteen states still had state sodomy laws in 2003
(in 1960, sodomy was outlawed in every state). In 1986, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled
that Georgia’s sodomy law did not violate privacy rights.

In 1998, John Lawrence and Tyron Garner were fined $200 and spent a night in
jail for violating a Texas statute that prohibits “deviate sexual intercourse” between two
people of the same sex. The Texas statute does not apply to heterosexual couples. Their
case was heard before the U.S. Supreme Court in March 2003. Attorneys for Lawrence
and Garner argued that the Texas law was an invasion of their privacy and violated
the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment because the law unfairly targets
same-sex couples. Attorneys for the state argued that Texas has the right to set moral
standards for its residents. In June 2003, the Court voted 6 to 3 to overrule the Texas
law and all other remaining sodomy laws. Writing for the decision, Justice Anthony
Kennedy said, “The state cannot demean their [homosexuals’] existence or control
their destiny by making their private sexual conduct a crime” (Greenhouse 2003:
A17). According to Kevin Cathcart, executive director of Lambda Legal, “This ruling
starts an entirely new chapter in our fight for equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and
transgendered people” (Lambda Legal 2003b).

Gay and lesbian couples are denied the same legal and social support given
heterosexual couples. Their families are denied common legal protections that non-
gay families take for granted such as adoption, custody, guardianship, social security,
and inheritance (Lambda Legal 2003a). Due to the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy for
homosexuals in the U.S. military, many gay and lesbian couples must keep their re-
lationships secret. During the U.S.-Iraq war, Christopher Marquis (2003) wrote about
the secrecy, paranoia, and frustration that was common among homosexual couples
and their families. Homosexual couples were forced to lie about their relationship and
were not able to access supportive services provided to heterosexual married partners.
Although their partners were deployed in the Middle East, the stateside gay or lesbian
partners were not eligible to use the base store or have access to support groups or
status reports on the troops’ whereabouts.

Reacting to what he called the “divisiveness” of President George W. Bush’s 2004
State of the Union Address on the issue of gay marriage, San Francisco Mayor Gavin
Newsom secretly began planning to marry gay and lesbian couples and convinced
longtime lesbian rights activists Del Martin, 83, and Phyllis Lyon, 79, to be the first to
get married (Quittner 2004). Said Newsom, “We wanted to put a human face on this,
and Phyllis and Del were critical. . . . To deny them the same protections as married
couples would be to deny them as human beings, not as theory” (Quittner 2004).
Between February 12 and March 10, 2004, more than 4,000 same-sex marriage licenses
were issued in San Francisco. Although the majority of couples were from California,
couples from 45 other states and 8 countries also applied for marriage licenses in the
city (Leff 2004).
The California Supreme Court ordered San Francisco to stop issuing same-sex marriage licenses on March 11, 2004. In August 2004, the California Supreme Court ruled that San Francisco Mayor Newsom did not have the authority to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples and declared the marriage licenses invalid. At the time of the decision, Phyllis Lyon said, “it is a terrible blow to have the rights and protections of marriage taken away from us. At our age, we do not have the luxury of time” (Lambda Legal 2004).

In response to the same-sex marriages in California, President Bush endorsed a constitutional amendment that would restrict marriage to two people of opposite sexes but left open the possibility that states could allow civil unions in same-sex relationships. However, in July 2004, the U.S. Senate failed to pass a constitutional amendment that would have declared marriage as a union only between a man and a woman. Democratic presidential and vice presidential candidates, Senators John Kerry and John Edwards, were opposed to the measure. Vice President Dick Cheney also opposed the measure, stating that he believes that states should have the right to decide what constitutes a marriage. (We will examine gay and lesbian families further in Chapter 4, Families. Employment discrimination against gays and lesbians will be discussed in Chapter 6, Work.)

Lambda Legal is a national organization committed to achieving full recognition of the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, the transgendered, and people with HIV or AIDS. The organization identifies each state that prohibits sexual orientation discrimination in employment. Investigate whether your state has discrimination laws by logging on to Lambda Legal’s Web site (log on to Study Site Chapter 3). If your state does include such laws, a brief summary of the legislation is included.

Inequalities Based on Age

We have socially and culturally defined expectations about the meaning of age, our understanding of it, and our responses to it (Calasanti and Slevin 2001). Age serves to distinguish acceptable behavior for different social groups. Voting rights, the legal age to consume alcohol, or the ability to hold certain elected offices (you can’t be president of the United States until you are at least 35 years old) are examples of formal age norms. Informal age norms also demonstrate how a society defines what is considered appropriate by age (Calasanti and Slevin 2001). We make a fuss over the 78–year-old weight lifter or the 13–year-old college student, noting their accomplishments simply because they are unexpected or deemed “unusual” for people of their age.

Dependency is one of the most negative attributes of being identified as “old” in our society (Calasanti and Slevin 2001). Stereotypes about the capacities, activities, and interests of older people reinforce the view that they are incapable of caring for
themselves (Pampel 1998). There is widespread acceptance of negative stereotypes about the elderly regarding their intellectual decline, conservatism, sexual decline, and lack of productivity (Levin and Levin 1980).

Research suggests that ageist attitudes may affect a physician’s therapeutic decisions toward older patients (Peppin 1995). Physicians perform fewer examinations and tests on older patients in comparison with younger patients. Older patients are denied life-saving treatments and access to new experimental treatments. A study reviewing the treatment of women with breast cancer found that women older than 50 are 6 to 62 times more likely not to receive chemotherapy treatments. Researchers hypothesized that the physicians felt the risk of drug toxicity outweighed the benefits of treatment for their older female patients (“Age Bias” 2003). However, what if the older patient has the same life expectancy as a younger patient? Another study examined the records of prostate cancer patients and found that older men who were healthier and expected to live at least for another 10 years were more likely to receive inadequate cancer treatment than younger patients with shorter life expectancy. Studies reveal that healthy older men, those in their 70s, who have aggressive prostate cancer can benefit from surgery or radiation therapy. Yet, it appears that doctors are using age, not life expectancy, to determine whether prostate cancer patients receive appropriate treatment (“Older Patients” 2004).

Although much attention has been given to the marginalization of Black, Hispanic, or female workers, another labor force group—older workers—have experienced their own set of unique problems. Older workers, those 45 years or older, may find it increasingly difficult to do their work, keep their job, or find another position (Swuwade 1996). In the workplace, older workers have been discriminated against in favor of younger, cheaper, less experienced workers. It used to be that seniority mattered in the workplace, but in The Incidence of Job Loss: The Shift from Younger to Older Workers, 1981-1996, researchers Michele Siegel, Charlotte Muller, and Marjorie Honig (2000) state how especially vulnerable older workers are in our new economy. The authors explain that during the recession of the early 1980s, men age 45 to 59 were less likely to lose their jobs than men age 25 to 39. The job loss rate for younger men was 60 percent higher than men age 45 to 59. It was normal practice that younger, less tenured employees were laid off, maintaining employment for older, more experienced workers. But during the recession of the early 1990s, older men were just as likely to be laid off as younger men. From 1991 to 1992, the rate of job loss among older workers was identical to the rate for younger workers, and the job loss rate among older college graduates was higher than among younger college graduates (Siegel et al. 2000).

When older workers are laid off, they are more likely to find jobs that are lower paying, temporary, and low skill in comparison to the jobs they left. Many equate older workers with more experience but also with higher salaries, which discourages potential employers (Fountain 2002). There is also the belief that older workers cannot be (re)trained, hindering their ability to find or retain a new job (Swuwade 1996). Yet, older workers are protected under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967. The Act prohibits employers from discriminating based on age against people 40 to 64 years old.
Most Americans picture retirement as a time when they can pursue leisure activities, help raise their grandchildren, and perhaps do some meaningful volunteer work in their community.
In reality, many of the elderly are not able to pursue this dream. They do not have ample wealth, good health, or the support of families and friends around them. Some of these problems might be worsened because of their social class, ethnicity, or gender.

Is society obligated to help the disadvantaged elderly? What types of assistance might be beneficial?
Operation ABLE (Ability Based on Long Experience) is based in Chicago, Illinois. In 1977, this nonprofit agency began reaching out to older workers, but it has recently revised its mission statement to serve people of all ages (Operation ABLE 2003a). The program has been honored locally and nationally for its service to employers and job seekers. In addition to its general employment assistance programs, Operation ABLE operates programs targeting older workers. Experience Works for 55+ is an information and referral program for retired men and women 55 years or older. The Senior Community Services Employment Program (SCSEP) was designed to help job seekers (55 years of age or older) on a limited income reenter the job market. The program, sponsored by the Illinois Department on Aging, places job seekers in temporary positions at nonprofit or community service agencies where they can enhance their jobs skills and return to full-time work (Operation ABLE 2003b). Chicago’s Operation ABLE is part of the National ABLE Network, a network of agencies that focus on serving mid-career or older workers and job seekers. Other Operation ABLE locations are in Boston, Los Angeles, Michigan, Nebraska, Vermont, and Washington, D.C. (National ABLE Network 2003).

**What Are Your Life Chances?**

Our discussion on inequality does not end here. In the remaining chapters of this text, I will highlight how certain problems differentially affect particular social groups. Here is a preview:

In 1996, there were 450,000 reports of elder abuse in domestic settings. Female elderly were more likely to be abused than male elderly; men and women 80 years or older are at higher risk for maltreatment; and in almost 90 percent of the reported incidents with a known perpetrator, the perpetrator was a family member. (Chapter 4, Families)

As reported in the 1999 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) youth are three times as likely to be assaulted or involved in at least one physical fight in school, three times more likely to have been threatened with a weapon in school, and nearly four times more likely to skip school because they felt unsafe than their heterosexual peers. (Chapter 5, Education)

The highest rates of poverty are among Black and Hispanic Americans. Individuals under 18 years of age have the highest poverty rate for any age group. (Chapter 9, Poverty)

Men and women with lower socioeconomic status, lower educational attainment, and lower occupational status have higher rates of mortality and disease than those higher on each dimension. (Chapter 7, Health and Medicine)

People of color and people with low income are disproportionately exposed to substandard housing. (Chapter 12, Cities and Suburbs)

This short list reflects how some groups—people of color, GLBT students, the elderly, or lower socioeconomic men and women—are at greater risk to experience social problems than other social groups. This should not be taken as an indictment against particular social groups or as evidence about their inherent weakness.
At first, you may believe that some are less prone to social problems because of their innate abilities or strong work ethic. But what should your sociological imagination tell you? Social problems may impact individuals, but social problems emerge out of the larger social structure. Throughout this text, you will learn how particular social characteristics contribute to advantages for some and disadvantages for others (Pampel 1998). Your life experience may have less to do with your ability or your hard work and more to do with how (well) you are positioned in society. We need to recognize how each social characteristic (class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity/race, or age) serves to shape the history, experiences, and opportunities of men, women, and children in the United States (Shapiro 2001). Ultimately, this includes one’s experience of social problems.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER: Which characteristic contributes most to social inequality? Class? Ethnicity or race? Gender? Sexual orientation? Age? Or something else?

MAIN POINTS

- Three additional bases of inequality have been discussed in this chapter: sex and gender, sexual orientation, and age. Each inequality is the basis for a form of prejudice or discrimination.
- Whereas sex refers to our biological differences (those set at birth), gender refers to our masculine and feminine behaviors (those set by our society or culture). Gender serves to legitimate certain activities and ways of thinking over others; it grants privilege to one group over another.
- Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 prohibits the exclusion of any person from participation in an educational program or the denial of benefits based on one’s sex. As one of the provisions of Title IX, schools are required to offer women and men equal opportunities to participate in athletics. The law has been widely credited with increasing women’s participation in high school and collegiate sports and also for supporting women’s achievement in education. However, some feel Title IX has been harmful to collegiate men’s programs. Out of concern that not all colleges and universities were complying with Title IX, the U.S. Department of Education formed a commission in 2002 to make recommendations. In January 2003, the commission recommended several changes.
  - Sexism refers to prejudice or discrimination based solely on someone’s sex. Sexism may be an individual act, but it can also become institutionalized in our organizations or through laws and common practices.
  - Heterosexism is the privileging of heterosexuality over homosexuality in society. Sexual orientation is defined as the classification of individuals according to their preference for emotional-sexual relationships and lifestyle with people of the same sex (heterosexuality) or people of the opposite sex (heterosexuality). Bisexuality refers to a condition of emotional and sexual attraction to people of either sex.
  - A socially determined prejudice, homophobia, is an irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuals. Homophobia is particularly
directed at gay men. Bisexual or homosexual men, women, and their families are subject to social inequalities through practices of discrimination and prejudice, surprisingly many of them institutionalized in formal law.

- Age also serves as a basis for prejudice or discrimination. Ageism is defined by Robert Butler (1969) as the “systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender” (p. 243). Age serves to distinguish acceptable behavior for different social groups. Research suggests that ageist attitudes may affect a physician’s therapeutic decisions toward older patients.

- Social problems may impact individuals, but social problems emerge out of the larger social structure.

- The discussion of inequality will continue throughout the text.

INTERNET AND COMMUNITY EXERCISES

1. The United Nations Human Development Report began in 1990 with the goal of monitoring people’s long-term well-being. Data collected in more than 120 nations track demographic trends, access to health services and resources, literacy and school enrollment, technology, and women’s political participation, among many other characteristics. You can go to the Human Development Report site to compare the level of women’s political participation in the United States with other nations. Go to Study Site Chapter 3 for the link.

2. Human Rights Campaign monitors several legal issues that impact the rights of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, the transgendered, and people with HIV or AIDS. Explore your state laws and pending legislation on privacy issues, workplace discrimination, marriage, and HIV/AIDS. Log on to Study Site Chapter 3 for a link to the Human Rights Campaign.

3. The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University was founded in 1971. CAWP provides informational materials on women in federal and state political offices, convenes national forums for women public officials, and organizes educational programs to prepare young women for public leadership. To find out the history of women public officials in your state, go to the Center’s Web site (log on to Study Site Chapter 3). The site also provides current fact sheets on women in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. The site also provides links to other political women’s groups such as Emily’s List (“Early Money Is Like Yeast”), a political organization for pro-choice Democratic women, and the National Federation of Republican Women, a political organization for women in the Republican Party.

4. The Grey Panthers is a national advocacy organization for older and retired adults. Organized in 1970 by Maggie Kuhn and five of her friends, the Grey Panthers’ first goal was to combat ageism. The Grey Panthers have also taken a stand on other important social issues: economic justice, medical care, education, and peace. Recent efforts have been directed toward policies assuring affordable prescription drugs for seniors, children, cancer, and HIV patients. Grey Panthers have more than 50 local chapters. To see if there is a chapter in your state, log on to Study Site Chapter 3. Contact the chapter for information about what activities are supported in your area.
On your own. Log on to Study Site–Community and Policy Guide for more information about the social problems, social policies, and community responses discussed in this chapter.

**References**