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Empowerment: A Prime Time for Women Over 50

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In preparing this chapter, the first author noted: "As someone who achieved a variety of offices and received many awards after age 50, I felt very much in control of my own life, but in no way felt that I was able to or wanted to control others." Thus, although it is important to understand that empowerment and power are tightly intertwined, these two concepts are different.

Power is often related to our ability to make others do what we want, regardless of their own wishes or interests. For most people, the word "power" typically brings to mind thoughts concerning control and domination (Page & Czuba, 1999). Traditional social science emphasizes power as influence and control, often treating power as a commodity or structure separate from human action. In this way, power can be viewed as unchanging or unchangeable, and available only to a select few (Page & Czuba, 1999).

Alternatively, empowerment refers to individuals gaining command over their own destinies (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000) as well as helping others to attain this control as well. Something that is empowering makes individuals feel more confident that they are in control of their own lives. Empowerment involves learning to redefine who we are and what we can do, to speak in our own voice, and to change the way we perceive our relationships to institutionalized power (Chamberlin, 1997). In general, an individual or even a group moves from a state of relative powerlessness to power through the empowerment process (Pillai, 1995). This process encompasses attitudes, values, and beliefs about the self, especially beliefs about the ability to exert control over one's destiny (Chadiha et al., 2004).

Empowering others is the process of supporting people to construct new meanings and use their freedom to choose new ways to respond to the world, often to the benefit of others. Empowering others involves providing individuals with the appropriate tools and resources to enhance their self-confidence and self-esteem, to develop leadership skills, and to strive for personal and professional success. Empowering others entails making a systematic and sustained effort to provide others with more information, knowledge, support, and opportunities to use their power for mutual benefit.

Yoder and Kahn (1992) suggested a reconceptualization of power; in this perspective, empowerment can be viewed as the *power-to*, rather than *power-over*. *Power-over* refers to the coercion and domination of one group over another group, or one person over another person. This power structure can be seen in societal, organizational, interpersonal, and individual levels, and it is used to force a person or entity to do what one individual wants. On the other hand, *power-to* equates to personal empowerment. In this conceptualization, individuals have the power to control their own feelings, thoughts, and actions. The focus is not on controlling others, but rather on using personal power to make improvements in one's life and to gain success for oneself. The *power-to* approach views empowerment as more of a process than an entity; the focus is on power as energy, potential, and competence, as opposed to domination, coercion, and/or competition (Browne, 1995). Such an assessment of power considers the empowerment of women and men to include women and men not only empowering themselves (i.e., developing personal agency) but also changing broader social structures (i.e., collective activism). According to Browne (1995), this form of empowerment is a process of liberation of self and others; it is a life force, a potential, a capacity, a form of growth and energy, where one works toward building both community and connection to others rather than solely striving toward achievement for one's individual good. This definition indicates that power is much more than coercion and domination; it is relational, is sustained by societal forces, and is a dynamic process (Yoder, 2003).

Empowerment may also be viewed as a primary goal of feminist therapy, and the process begins with the assumption that the therapist and the client are equal in the therapy dyad (Denmark et al., 2005). Although clinical and counseling psychologists view personal empowerment (i.e., agency) as a step toward enhanced psychological well-being, feminist psychologists integrate both individualistic independence and communal interdependence into their conceptions. Feminist psychologists found the traditional psychological notion of power, with its emphasis on dominance, control, or influence over others, discomforting, and they emphasize that power must be understood as relational. Thus, power exists within the context of a relationship between people or things; it does not exist in isolation, nor is it inherent in individuals (Page & Czuba, 1999). Thus, along these lines, women feel empowered in and by themselves and in their relationships (Yoder, 2003).

This chapter covers issues related to empowerment, including how feminist psychologists view empowerment; the effects of culture, race, and class on empowerment; how women can help other women become empowered; the role of women's organizations; and international policies that promote the empowerment of women. Empowerment is also discussed in terms of midlife and how growing older affects women's sense of empowerment during different phases of their lives. Feminist women were asked to comment on their views of empowerment, and their perspectives are used to help us to illustrate this concept.

Feminist Women Look at Empowerment

To discover how feminist psychologists view empowerment, a questionnaire was distributed to 100 feminist women, 25 of whom responded. The majority reported that they believe that women are most empowered during midlife, between the ages of 40 and 60. In contrast, for men, the respondents indicated a much wider range: Men are most empowered between the ages of 30 and 70. The respondents indicated that women were the least empowered below the age of 30 and above the age of 70, and the majority identified 80 and older as the least empowered age group for men. This perception of a gender difference is noteworthy. The age span of empowerment for men is perceived as twice as great as that of women, and the least empowered men are seen as 10 years older than the least empowered women.

How Can We Increase Empowerment for Women?

In addition to gender, other factors related to empowerment that respondents reported as most important were: education, occupation, socioeconomic status, holding political office, organizational activities, and ethnicity. Answers to this question were varied, and yet all pointed to the importance of empowerment in various spheres of women's lives. The following are some of the suggestions respondents gave for increasing women's empowerment.

First, many respondents spoke about the need for empowerment in the political system. Through this empowerment, women can become more organized collectively and, thereby, influence important social issues. In this sense, empowerment is characterized as an active entity: It involves fighting for good legislation, involving oneself in all aspects of society, influencing legislators, as well as communicating one's ideas and attitudes. In this view of activism, many of the respondents spoke about the necessity to involve the younger generation and to teach that through an active, empowered stance, change can be made. Individuals in high positions should use their influence in order to empower others and to push for social changes that will result in the equality of all people. Therefore, the relationship between empowerment and change was stated repeatedly in responses from the participants.

A second premise that ran through many responses was encouragement and the belief that this was a necessary activity for further empowerment. Respondents believed that women first need to acknowledge that they have the right to be empowered. In other words, empowerment encourages women to view themselves as centers of power, teaches them how to use that power, and instructs them in how to believe that they can accomplish the things that they wish to do.

Another common theme that ran through the respondents' suggestions was the significance of education for both women and men. Women and men should not be positioned against each other, but rather both should be encouraged to use their resources for the benefit of all. Some believed that mutuality is the goal for all people; therefore, empowerment is not meant to be an "us against them" mentality. Education for both women and men was seen as critical to foster empowerment. According to Lips (2005), making gender stereotypes less rigid should be empowering for both women and men, as it increases their sense of

effectiveness and self-actualization. Many of the respondents reported that they believe it is important that individuals organize and work together for mutual empowerment.

As noted by the respondents, midlife is often deemed the age period during which women are most empowered. It is the time when women realize that they have accomplished a great deal in their lives and that they have the education and knowledge of the world needed to advocate successfully for themselves and others. Many women in midlife have taken on leadership roles and are in positions of power and leadership, which helps them to advocate successfully for themselves (thus empowering themselves) and also to aid in the empowerment of others (Babladelis, 1999).

Midlife, Aging, and Empowerment

It is helpful to understand the political, economic, cultural, and societal situation in which women find themselves during midlife. In U.S. society, older women, despite often leading rewarding and productive lives, fall prey to negative stereotypes. Women in midlife and beyond are typically viewed as grey, wrinkled, and no longer sexually attractive. They are often excluded from social situations and undervalued by employers. Aging is something that is embarrassingly covered up—grey hair is often dyed and saggy faces are often surgically lifted. Television often shows older women taking aspirin, Geritol, and baking sweets for their grandchildren (Lott, 1987). Women in this age group are frequently depicted as stubborn, helpless, forgetful, and dependent—if they are shown on television at all.

Aging in Western societies has often been associated with issues related to declining health, social care, and welfare. These issues have dominated the study of aging, which has caused exceedingly negative accounts of later life. By assuming that fulfillment in aging is dependent on the ability of individuals to accept or adapt to physical and social change, we are perpetuating the stereotype of aging as a period of inevitable decline or loss and something to be endured. Too much emphasis is placed on personality and physiological adjustment and not enough on social inequalities that begin in midlife (Wray, 2004).

On a positive note, although many individuals view midlife development for women in a pessimistic manner, others realize that change is possible for women during this developmental period. For the majority of women, midlife is not characterized by a deterioration of capacities, but rather the opposite—it is a time of productivity and happiness (Denmark et al., 2005). Many women over 50 are in the prime of their lives, able to negotiate successfully many spheres of life including home, family, career, and friends. Those who view midlife as a time of productivity focus on the potential of women during midlife for increased competence and a greater sense of identity, which is the essence of empowerment (Stewart et al., 2001).

Development Stage: Midlife

Identity is typically viewed as an achievement of adolescence or early adulthood; however, some psychologists, particularly Erikson, have suggested that women

and men might not achieve their identities at the same point in development. Rather, Erikson proposed that women might not achieve a sense of identity until later in life, in the context of intimate relationships. Identity development seems to have important implications for well-being in midlife. For instance, research has indicated that identity development is positively related to midlife self-esteem and life satisfaction in women (Stewart et al., 2001).

Erikson's theory also posits that midlife adults face the conflict of "generativity versus stagnation" and acquire the ego strength (i.e., virtue) of care in its resolution. Erikson suggested that women, like men, experience a midlife generativity crisis, which results to some extent from age-related social pressures to make a contribution to the next generation. This crisis results in a capacity and commitment to care for ideas, cultural products, institutions, values, and other people (Stewart et al., 2001).

Generativity has only recently been widely discussed. It refers not only to bearing and nurturing children but also includes creativity (i.e., the production of new works and things) and the generation of new ideas. Thus, generativity includes both creating and caring (De St. Aubin et al., 2004). Conventional gender patterns of generativity have changed due to substantial changes in gender roles over time, including the increased vocational aspirations of women and the increased domestic responsibilities of men. Feminists have challenged traditional definitions of generativity as a result of these new conceptions of adult development (De St. Aubin et al., 2004).

Researchers have found a number of differences between middle-aged women and men. The most profound difference in attitude between men and women at middle age is that women are twice as likely as men to be hopeful about the future. More and more women see midlife not as a crisis, but rather as a challenge, or, on a more positive note, as an opportunity to better themselves. They also have a more powerful urge to help others or to make a contribution to some larger good. Women are typically more willing than men at midlife to consider trying something completely new in a search for greater flexibility, challenge, or satisfaction. They are more likely to be optimistic, despite obstacles due to aging. Optimism in middle-aged women takes many forms. Women at midlife believe that they will stay healthy longer than women of previous generations. They are joining gyms at twice the rate of their male peers (Gibbs, 2005). In addition, full-time college enrollment by older women rose to 31% in the past decade (Gibbs, 2005). The National Center on Women & Aging at Brandeis University (as cited in Gibbs, 2005) found that women age 50 and older said that they feel happier about getting older than they had anticipated. Thus, women at midlife feel more confident about their coping skills, which enhances their sense of mastery of life.

Why Midlife and Beyond Is a Time of Empowerment

The responses to our empowerment questionnaire correspond to published research and indicate the same conclusion: Midlife and beyond can be a particularly empowering period in a woman's life. This reality is in opposition to the stereotypes

that are present in the culture about this time in women's lives. A recent article in *Time* magazine (Gibbs, 2005) focused on how midlife women in this generation are taking advantage of this critical life period in order to reinvent themselves. Rather than falling prey to the obstacles of midlife, women are figuring out how to turn challenges into opportunities. As a result of higher incomes, better education, and considerable experience at managing multiple roles, women may actually realize that there has never been a better time than now to have a "midlife crisis." Because such a large cluster of women are experiencing middle age (i.e., there are roughly 43 million American women ages 40 to 60), some rules may have to be rewritten and boundaries shifted to accommodate them. The word "crisis" may not apply to midlife for women in this generation because they are creating a new model for what midlife might look like.

Gibbs (2005) found that women, more specifically, middle and upper middle class and professional women, from their 50s on, often experience the most fruitful and satisfying period of life. Many women, at this time of their lives, realize skills and strengths that were never before tapped or exercised. Others experience this period as one of tremendous growth, and they frequently redefine their personalities. In some cases, occupational and social pursuits are picked up where they had been left off for years due to marriage and familial responsibilities. Women have a great deal to look forward to during this exciting period in their lives such as travel, work, sociability, and study. The midlife years are a time to try new things, to go to places never visited before, and to do things not done earlier. Books and magazine articles urge women at about age 50 to take the time to think seriously about what is most important to them and what they want to accomplish with the rest of their lives.

Staying involved in professional organizations and volunteering are ways for older women to have an influence and a voice. Of course, one probably has the most impact with continuing professional involvement. The vast majority of women who are chairs of academic departments, high level executives, and owners of small businesses are also in this age bracket.

This is also a wonderful time of opportunity and freedom, and many women exert their influence politically. Currently, the number of midlife women in the population is larger than ever, which means that there is an increasingly important role for older women in public life. Many older women activists consider feminism broadly in this context and perceive their activities as a means of nurturing others. Women in their 50s and beyond are in perfect positions to make great impacts on local, national, and even worldwide levels. For example, nearly all of the women in the United States Congress are at least 50 years old (Congressional Research Service, 2004).

Times are changing for women in general, and "the daughters of today's women" are more likely than their mothers to be well-educated, to have explored several personal options, and to have had long years of employment experiences. Therefore, they are more likely, when grey hair and wrinkles appear, to resist being pushed aside by younger people (Lott, 1987). Currently, older active women in the United States and worldwide can and do have an impact on the world around them, at least in part by virtue of their age. Women gain personal power, prestige,

and influence as they grow older. The perceived balance of interpersonal power in the latter half of women's lives increases in favor of older women. This increase is also apparent in terms of equality between men and women during the later stages of a woman's development. It is interesting that it is the social status of a woman that impacts on her power, and it is those women who have achieved a higher social status who can expect to have a greater amount of perceived power in their middle and later years (Todd et al., 1990). Conditions for gifted women during their 50s and beyond are particularly positive.

Some women say that life "begins" at 50, and it is not uncommon for women at midlife and even later to discover new talents and interests and employ them successfully (Allington & Troll, 1984). One study (Mitchell & Helson, 1990) indicated that women in their early 50s gave higher satisfaction ratings to their lives than did either older or younger women. An increasing number of women are beginning or returning to college or work in middle or older adulthood after years of devoting their lives exclusively to their families. These women are referred to as "reentry" women. Despite the obstacles these women face, reentry women tend to do very well in their pursuits. In college, they work hard and participate actively in their education. Research (De Groot, 1980) shows that women who attend college at an older age are more assertive and, as such, expect and receive more spousal support, which increases the likelihood of their success. Middle-aged women also function effectively in the workplace and experience great job satisfaction. This is particularly true for those in "careers" as opposed to those with "jobs." In one study (Coleman & Antonucci, 1983) older women in the workforce reported experiencing greater psychological well-being, self-esteem, and health than did their homemaker counterparts. These findings attest to the possibilities and opportunities that arise during midlife for women. The population of reentry women is likely to increase as life spans grow longer and good health care continues longer in life.

All of these factors combine to make midlife and beyond a fruitful and productive time in women's lives, one that breeds empowerment. Women perceive themselves as intelligent, assertive, and determined in middle age, and they are serious about the task of empowering themselves and others (Babladelis, 1999). Women in midlife are geared through family, economic, and social factors to be able to focus on their own needs, and they often have the means to ascertain them successfully.

The 50s onward appears to be almost a golden age for certain women. Studies (e.g., Mitchell & Helson, 1990) have shown that women feel secure, enjoy good health, and experience a fairly autonomous and androgynous period of time. College educated women in their early 50s who were polled as to their quality of life and current life satisfaction rated their lives as "first-rate" (Mitchell & Helson, 1990). Good health and increased income during these years also contribute to feelings of security, greater self-confidence, involvement, and breadth of personality by women who are older. Considering the 50s onward as the empowering prime of life for women is an appropriate classification (Mitchell & Helson, 1990).

The "Empty Nest" Syndrome

The effects of the so-called empty nest syndrome (i.e., when children leave home) vary from person to person. Midlife women who work can enjoy benefits such as professional development, financial autonomy, intellectual stimulation, an expanded social group, and a sense of self-independent of the family. These women may associate an empty nest with a sense of relief and an opportunity for greater marital satisfaction (Rollins, 1989). As relationships mature during midlife, tender feelings of affection and loyalty tend to replace passion and sexual intimacy as a main focus (Reedy et al., 1981). Thus, some marriages, although turbulent in early adulthood, turn out to be better adjusted during middle adulthood. Many women view their children's departure as an overall positive event, even if they have mixed emotions about it (Troll, 1989). The empty nest is really only problematic for those women whose lives revolve around their children to the exclusion of outside interests and activities. This may suggest that in today's day and age, with many more than one-half of American women working outside the home and building their own careers, the empty nest syndrome is becoming less and less common.

Conceptions of Empowerment: Race, Class, and Cross-cultural Factors

It is important to include in any discussion about empowerment, the socially bound structures of inequality that make empowerment more or less difficult for certain groups of women. Within the United States, discrimination based on race, class, and culture all work against women of these groups, making empowerment a critical force in their lives but a challenging one to achieve.

Empowerment and Race

In addition to sex discrimination, African American women must mediate and overcome the disadvantages placed on them due to race (Parker, 2003). Therefore, Women of Color must mediate different levels of oppression, which can make empowerment doubly challenging in these women's lives.

In the process of defending against the sexism and racism of society, African American women have developed strategies and processes of their own in order to empower themselves. Unlike European American women who are faced only with patriarchal systems of domination, African American women are part of that reality but also are faced with racist systems of domination. This duality has created the need for African American women to empower themselves in unique ways.

A review of the literature (Parker, 2003) shows that there are five themes specific to midlife African American women and their empowerment. These are: developing and using voice, being self-defined, being self-determined, connecting and building community, and seeking spirituality and regeneration. African American women have developed a Black feminist standpoint, which conceptualizes

self-definition and self-determination as the power to name and decide one's own destiny. Community, spirituality, and speaking out against oppression have also been used as tools and methods through which to attain empowerment.

Especially in working contexts, African American women must "negotiate and reconcile the contradictions separating internally defined images of self as African American women whose identities are (re)produced through patriarchal systems of domination and subordination" (Parker, 2003, p. 262). It is this process of negotiating identities that has given African American women unique ways of empowering themselves. They actively strive to use the strategies mentioned above to work against the stereotypes that patriarchal society has developed.

The empowerment model is a model of social change and therapeutic intervention that focuses on promoting assets, strengths, and resilience in people (Querimit & Conner, 2003). This has important implications for Women of Color in midlife and beyond. Quermit and Conner (2003) studied this model in youth of Color but many comparisons can be made to older Women of Color as well. Women over 50 still must overcome social inequality, but now they have achieved more skills and assets on which to rely. They can depend upon these developed strengths in order to empower themselves, despite the social inequalities and oppression in their lives. In this way, age becomes a mediating factor and an aid in empowering older Women of Color.

The following is a case example of an African woman who used many of the strategies noted above to empower herself. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of Liberia, is a prime example of a woman over 50 who promotes empowerment for women. Elected by a stunning 60% of the vote in November 2005 to become the first female elected leader in Africa's history, Johnson-Sirleaf now has the responsibility of mending her broken country. A Harvard graduate in economics, Johnson-Sirleaf is currently tackling the economic and social problems in her country. Born to two Liberian parents who were adopted by American Liberians living in the United States, she was instilled with a sense of duty and honesty. On the way, however, she has not forgotten issues important to the women of her country. She is working to raise public consciousness about issues of wife abuse, rape, and women's inheritance of property. A rape victim herself, she, along with a group of lawyers, has worked to enact laws that ensure that rapists will be penalized with stricter sentences. According to Hammer (2006), Johnson-Sirleaf is one of the growing number of women in Africa who are climbing to power and working toward women's empowerment initiatives. African women are "breaking the male stranglehold on national legislation, cabinets, courts, and other government institutions. They're making laws, changing attitudes, inspiring other women to follow them" (Hammer, 2006, p. 32). In other words, Johnson-Sirleaf embodies the concept of the empowerment of women.

Empowerment and Class

The discussion of class is clearly related to empowerment. Many Women of Color are also living in poverty or struggling to provide for themselves and their families.

Women immigrants, and women of all ethnicities born into families below the poverty line, report that monetary disadvantage has led to part of the disempowerment that they experience (Darlington & Mulvaney, 2003). Darlington and Mulvaney (2003) distributed a questionnaire to 25 women who identified themselves as Hispanic, Cuban American, Spanish, White Spanish, White Cuban American, and "multi." Questions were aimed at determining these women's view of power and empowerment in the United States. Some women's statements make clear the connection between class and empowerment. As a response to what they thought power meant in the United States today, one women stated that power in American society is "to be White and to have money" (all quotes p. 131). Other responses included that power is "wealth, it seems only rich people are powerful," "I think power is related to wealth; it's also related to how much you've got in terms of what you drive and what you wear," and "Power is viewed as a tool for control." In terms of power definitions in Latin American countries, these women said that power was also related to control. One woman said that power is "To be of high class, have studied in good private schools, and to come from a wealthy family."

Andrews et al. (2003) studied the conceptualization of empowerment by women in poverty and lower socioeconomic classes, specifically from the southern United States. These women had to endure geographic isolation, unemployment, low educational attainment, and limited access to services. Participants' comments about a fictitious woman named Angela and her life story were audiotaped for analysis to capture the women's beliefs about what methods are possible for Angela to use to break free from the difficult situation in which she finds herself (Angela is poor with few resources). The women were asked to comment about Angela's life and about her strengths and limitations. Empowerment was woven into their answers, and most women thought that Angela needed to take control of her life, despite the challenges with which she is confronted due to her class status. Their conceptions of empowerment were in strong relation to notions of class and the need to break free from the trouble that low socioeconomic status creates (i.e., to empower oneself). There were themes in their responses of optimism, persistence, ability to let go, ability to seek and accept help, and spirituality. Their responses indicated that empowering attributes were closely related to interpersonal and environmental factors and were not in isolation to what was experienced day to day.

The results of that study make it clear that class is a large consideration in women's conceptions of who is empowered and who is not. In both the United States and in immigrants' countries of origin, the upper classes have more power, and they are "entitled" to greater advantages that the society has to offer. In the United States and elsewhere, class is, therefore, also related to empowerment, in that lower classes must strive harder to empower themselves in a society that is structurally skewed against them. Becker et al. (2004) also sought to operationalize individual notions of empowerment in a sample of advocates working with low-income mothers. Overall, these authors used the term empowerment outright as "setting goals, gathering information, defining needs, and making and implementing decisions" (p. 332). All of these were ways in which the women

could empower themselves and, in doing this, help to alleviate the pressures put on them by their class status.

Empowerment and Cross-cultural Factors

It is important to bear in mind that notions of empowerment vary with culture and ethnic background. Agency and self-sufficiency are often used as theoretical indicators and measures of "successful" aging and quality of life. Along these lines, success is associated with individual potential, or with the ability to adapt to the challenges of getting older. However, this is highly problematic for two reasons. First of all, these notions are derived from dominant Euro-American conceptions of what constitutes power, which are often associated with notions of independence and autonomy that are Western-specific. Such concepts vary according to time and space and confer different meanings across different ethnicities, cultures, and historical time periods. Second, existing knowledge of what constitutes autonomy, independence, agency, and empowerment in later life tends to be uncritically and universally applied, which results in the endorsement of dominant values and perceptions (Wray, 2004). Instead, researchers should investigate how diverse social, cultural, and historical backgrounds shape perceptions and experiences of successful aging. Specifically, the impact of cultural and ethnic affiliation on notions of agency, empowerment, and disempowerment should be assessed. To understand what constitutes agency and empowerment necessitates an analysis of the values, beliefs, and norms that distinguish cultural groupings.

It is also important to note that various countries have different cultural levels of gender empowerment. In 2004, the United Nations Development Program ranked 78 countries based on number of seats in Parliament held by women, the number of female officials and managers, the number of female professional and technical workers, and the ratio of estimated women's to men's earned income. Results indicated that Norway attained the highest gender empowerment rank, the United States was 14th, Japan was 38th, and Saudi Arabia was 77th (United Nations Development Program, 2004). See Table 10.1.

Wray (2004) investigated experiences of agency, empowerment, and disempowerment in 170 British women between 60- and 80-years-old. These women came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, which affected their perceptions of what constituted agency and control in their lives. For instance, quality of life may be defined in a number of ways: medical/health factors, social support, personal development and fulfillment, income, and relations with others. However, results indicated that there was some agreement across groups that good health was an important quality of life issue. The majority regarded having a degree of control over their health and agility as central to agency and autonomy. Yet, despite this, health-related problems (e.g., asthma, diabetes, arthritis) did not prevent the women from getting on with and enjoying their lives (Wray, 2004). In addition, religious and spiritual beliefs were an important factor that influenced their quality of life. However, differences emerged between ethnic groups in the significance attached to beliefs as sources of collective agency and empowerment. The majority

TABLE 10.1. Gender empowerment by country.

Country	Gender empowerment measure (GEM) rank	Seats in parliament held by women (% of total)	Female legislators senior officials and managers (% of total)	Female professional and technical workers (% of total)	Ratio of estimated women's to men's earned income
Norway	1	36.4	28	49	0.74
Canada	10	23.6	34	54	0.63
New Zealand	11	28.3	38	52	0.69
Austria	13	30.6	29	48	0.36
United States	14	14.0	46	55	0.62
Mexico	34	21.2	25	40	0.38
Japan	38	9.9	10	46	0.46
Venezuela	61	9.7	27	61	0.41
Republic of Korea	68	5.9	5	34	0.46
Pakistan	64	20.8	9	26	0.33
Saudi Arabia	77	0.0	1	31	0.21

Source: (United Nations Development Program, 2004).

spoke of the happiness, sense of well-being, belongingness, hope, and empowerment that they derived from their beliefs and how these feelings emerged in their daily lives.

Overall, interdependence was an important source of empowerment and agency (Wray, 2004). Having a continuing role to play in the lives of their children contributed feelings of authority, self-worth, and power. Here, power is an aspect of interdependency and reciprocity rather than of independence and self-sufficiency. The absence of this type of collaborative reciprocity and/or the loss of the parenting role was cited as potentially disempowering across ethnic groups. Grandparenting was also perceived differently across culture. For some African Caribbean and Dominican women, and for a small number of White British women, grandparenting provided opportunities to act autonomously. For other women, child-care and domestic responsibilities were viewed in a more negative light. Some British Muslim women spoke of their preference to live apart from their children due to a desire for freedom from familial responsibilities and for independence. There was evidence to suggest that a number of British Pakistani and Indian women lived alone and preferred it that way. Women living in extended families often found their living arrangements to be both empowering and disempowering. On the one hand, playing an active role as a family member was viewed in a positive manner. Alternatively, others viewed living with offspring as undesirable due to their need for privacy or freedom from responsibilities and obligations.

Overall, Wray (2004) demonstrated that women from different backgrounds use different strategies to pursue active lives and to remain in control as they grow older. Thus, what constitutes agency and empowerment for women in mid and later life is a question that generates a variety of responses, all of which deserve equal attention and investigation.

Organizations That Promote Empowerment

As we have seen previously, midlife and older women tend to participate more actively in politics and in organized efforts for social change. Some older women view their efforts as connected to feminism (Garland, 1988). In fact, midlife women have been instrumental in improving their positions through organizations like the Gray Panthers, the National Organization for Women (NOW), the Association for Women in Psychology (AWP), and groups connected to the United Nations.

The National Organization for Women (NOW)

NOW is the largest organization of feminist activists in the United States, with 500,000 contributing members and 550 chapters in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. NOW has decades of experience in political advocacy, training local activists, and providing their members with the resources to organize and to be strong advocates for women's rights. NOW's goal is to take action in order to bring about equality for all women. Activists strive for the "feminization of power" and support women's rights candidates for election to federal, state, and local governments. NOW works to eliminate discrimination and harassment in the workplace, the schools, the justice system, and all other sectors of society; to secure abortion, birth control, and other reproductive rights for all women; to end all forms of violence against women; to eradicate racism, sexism, and homophobia; and to promote equality and justice in our society. NOW's actions have greatly contributed to extensive changes that have put more women in political posts. NOW's efforts have also increased educational, employment, and business opportunities for women. In addition, NOW has worked for stricter laws against violence, harassment, and discrimination against women. NOW's official priorities are to win economic equality and secure it with an amendment to the U.S. constitution that will guarantee equal rights for women; to champion abortion rights, reproductive freedom, and other women's health issues; to oppose racism and fight bigotry against lesbians and gay men; and to end violence against women. Now activists use both traditional and nontraditional means to push for social change. They do extensive electoral and lobbying work, and they bring lawsuits. They organize mass marches, rallies, pickets, nonviolent civil disobedience, and immediate, responsive "zap" actions (National Organization for Women, 2006).

The Gray Panthers

The Gray Panthers is a national intergenerational grassroots organization that was founded by older people. Members strive to achieve progressive social change in a variety of domains that affect people of all ages. Such issues include antidiscrimination, social and economic justice, affordable housing, universal health care, peace, educational improvement, and environmental preservation. Gray Panthers believe that, in an interdependent world, the welfare of all is achieved by policies

that preserve peace, heal the wounded environment, and respect the rights of all individuals to share in determining policy. Furthermore, they seek to unite young, old, women, and men of all ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds for the study and promotion of social justice. They reason that governments exist in order to facilitate the achievement of social justice for all (Gray Panthers, 2006).

Association for Women in Psychology (AWP)

Other organizations are more focused on particular issues. For instance, the AWP was founded in 1969 at the American Psychological Association's (APA) annual convention; however it operates outside of the APA's organizational structure and maintains a broader-than-psychology membership and vision. AWP sponsors regional and national conferences on feminist psychology as well as several annual awards. They frequently collaborate with other organizations to promote a feminist approach to research, teaching, and mental health, and they maintain an active liaison program with other feminist and psychological organizations. AWP has been an official non-governmental organization (NGO) of the United Nations since 1976 and has participated in international conferences.

AWP is a not-for-profit scientific and educational organization committed to encouraging feminist psychological research, theory, and activism. AWP has a strong a history of supporting and celebrating differences, deepening challenges, and experiencing growth as feminists. AWP is devoted to reevaluating and reformulating the role that psychology and the mental health field generally play within women's lives. They seek to act responsively and sensitively with regard to women by challenging the unquestioned assumptions, research traditions, theoretical commitments, clinical and professional practices, and institutional and societal structures that limit the understanding, treatment, professional attainment, and self-determination of women and men, or that contribute to unwelcome divisions between women based on race, ethnicity, age, social class, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation. Thus, AWP's role includes the education and sensitization of mental health professionals, the encouragement and recognition of women's concerns and those who promote them, the reconceptualization and expansion of perspectives within psychology, advocacy and critique regarding professional and institutional practices, and the provision of opportunities for creative feminist contributions and the dissemination of feminist ideas (Association for Women in Psychology, 2006).

Lobbying by AWP was directly responsible for the establishment of the Society for the Psychology of Women (APA Division 35) in 1973. Joint AWP and Division 35 efforts resulted in the establishment of a Women's Program Office at APA's national headquarters. The AWP agenda includes efforts to eliminate racism in public and private organizations. One goal of the association is to make people aware of the interface between gender and race in the psychology of women. One of AWP's primary purposes is feminist activism. AWP is devoted to achieving various objectives: (1) challenging unfounded assumptions about the psychological "natures" of women and men; (2) encouraging feminist psychological research on

sex and gender; (3) combating the oppression of Women of Color; (4) developing a feminist model of psychotherapy; (5) achieving equality for women within the profession of psychology and allied disciplines; (6) promoting unity among women of all races, ages, social classes, sexual orientations, physical abilities, and religions; (7) sensitizing the public and the profession to the psychological, social, political, and economic problems of women; (8) helping women to create individual sexual identities; and (9) encouraging research on issues of concern to Women of Color.

American Psychological Association—Division 35—Society for the Psychology of Women

Division 35 was founded in 1973 in order to focus on the psychology of women. Today, there are over 2400 members. The Society is "devoted to providing an organizational base for all feminists, women, and men of all national origins who are interested in teaching, research or practice in the psychology of women" (American Psychological Association, 2005). The purpose of Division 35 is to promote feminist research, theories, education, and practice; to encourage scholarship on the social construction of gender relations across multicultural contexts; to apply feminist scholarship to transforming the knowledge base of psychology; and to advocate action toward public policies that advance equality. Empowerment is, therefore, very highly linked to the goals and purpose of this division within APA. Through many different media, women are encouraged to strive toward empowerment and also to facilitate the way for structural changes to be made to help achieve empowerment for future generations.

The United Nations

An international organization that can facilitate the advancement of empowerment for the world's women is the United Nations. The UN plays a central role in the promotion of peace and security, development, and human rights around the world. Since its founding, the UN has been working to affirm the fundamental equality of all people and to counter discrimination in all its forms. Through UN efforts, governments have concluded many multilateral agreements that make the world a safer, healthier place with greater opportunity and justice *for all of us*. The United Nations provides the means to help resolve international conflicts and formulate policies on matters that affect everyone. At the UN, all the member states—large and small, rich and poor, with different political views and social systems—have a voice and a vote in this process (United Nations, 2006). One of the UN's central mandates is the promotion of higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development. As much as 70% of the work of the UN system is devoted to accomplishing this mandate. Guiding the work is the belief that eradicating poverty and improving the well-being of people everywhere are necessary steps in creating conditions for

lasting world peace. The UN and its agencies, including the World Bank and the UN Development Programme, are the premier vehicles for furthering development in poorer countries.

The millennium development goals (MDGs,), issued by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2001, are a "roadmap" for implementing the Millennium Declaration, which was presented at the September 2000 UN Millennium Summit. The Millennium Declaration reflects widespread international recognition that the empowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality are issues of human rights and social justice. Equality and women's empowerment are fundamental to the achievement of all of the MDGs, whether it is the eradication of poverty, protection of the environment, or access to healthcare. Attempts to meet the MDGs without integrating gender equality would both raise the cost and diminish the success. Because the MDGs are mutually reinforcing, success in attaining the goals will have positive effects on gender equality, just as advancement toward gender equality in any one domain will help to promote each of the other goals (Women's Environment & Development Organization, 2004).

By the year 2015, all 191 UN Member States have pledged to meet the MDG goals. The eight MDGs include: (1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) achieve universal primary education; (3) promote gender equality and empower women; (4) reduce child mortality; (5) improve maternal healthcare; (6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; (7) ensure environmental sustainability; and (8) develop a global partnership development (Millennium Project, 2006).

Goal #3 makes clear the importance of activating a comprehensive, rather than a piecemeal, program to advance gender equality. Accordingly, Goal #3 encompasses gender equality in all aspects of women's lives—gender-based violence, cultural stereotypes, trafficking and prostitution, armed conflict, political life, laws and legal status, government structures, the media, education, employment, health care, family planning, poverty, the environment, rural life, and marriage and family relations. The full range of measures that must be taken to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment have already been comprehensively mapped out in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action, as well as in major provisions of other international instruments and conference documents (UNIFEM, 2004).

In addition to the UN's international policy programs and organizations, the NGOs within the UN promote social awareness and activism of various issues. Two specific NGOs, the committee on the status of women and the committee on ageing, are active in promoting the empowerment of women. The committee on the status of women, specifically the sub-committee of older women (SCOW), is a group of women, primarily over 50, who promote issues and education of issues that are relevant to women in this age group. The NGO committee on the status of women (NGO CSW) was founded after the UN general assembly proclaimed 1975 as the International Women's Year and recommended that international action be intensified to: promote equality between men and women; ensure full integration of women in the total development effort; and recognize the importance of women's

increasing contribution to the development of friendly relations and cooperation among states; and to strengthen world peace. The NGO CSW New York provides a forum for exchange of information, education, and awareness and for substantive discussion on issues and policies related to women under consideration by the United Nations as well as other relevant women-related studies and programs (Women's United Nations Report Program & Network, n.d.). SCOW prepares statements and prepares events related to issues and changes that need to be made on behalf of older women. The women in these committees exemplify empowerment at its best: Women work together to promote key issues and, in doing, so they affect positive change for women of all ages. The NGO Committee on Ageing's work also coincides with the empowerment of women. This NGO works to promote issues relevant to older persons, many of whom are women.

UNIFEM, or the United Nations' Development Fund for Women, works on behalf of women from all countries of the world. It provides financial and technical assistance to innovative programs and strategies to foster women's empowerment and gender equality. Specifically, the UNIFEM Arab States Regional Office's projects and programs target many different aspects of women's lives in this region, such as economic rights, human rights, and involvement in the political process. UNIFEM programs promote women's leadership in all sectors, with the goal of giving women an equal voice in shaping the policies that affect their lives and choices. Through its projects and activities, UNIFEM aims to achieve the following objectives to support women's leadership: (1) peace and security—strengthening gender focus in prevention, making gender perspectives central to peace processes, and supporting gender justice in postconflict peace-building; (2) gender justice—women's empowerment and equal participation in leadership and political decision making are necessary elements for ensuring that gender equality is integrated into policy making and constitutional, electoral, and judicial reform (UNIFEM, 2004).

Women and Leadership: Using Leadership to Empower Others

Women have increasingly gained greater leadership roles in organizations and thus have had a greater impact on corporate strategy. The management literature suggests that the values of future organizations may suit women to a greater degree than was the case for women in the past (Colwill & Townsend, 1999). Self-knowledge, building relationships, facilitation skills, and empowering others are emerging as essential skills for all managers. These skills are increasingly identified as the central elements for successful executives, a movement away from the traditional male autocrat of the 1970s. Research (Colwill & Townsend, 1999) has shown that many characteristics identified as "good management skills" are also characteristics ascribed to "traditional women." Many of these good managerial abilities relate to communication patterns. For instance, overall, women value communication and relationships, such as working together toward a common purpose, and

understanding others (Colwill & Townsend, 1999). Women are more exploratory and less instrumental in their communication than men are. They are more likely to communicate issues that are judged unnecessary by men, but, in doing so, they can impart a broader understanding to others (Colwill & Townsend, 1999).

Merely being recognized as a leader does not make one either powerful or empowering. For example, Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, and Queen Beatrix Wilhelmina Armgard of the Netherlands are primarily figureheads. Other leaders are powerful or have been powerful but not empowering, such as Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, and Condoleezza Rice. Women leaders who have worked to empower other women include Susan B. Anthony, Betty Freidan, Gloria Steinem, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, and Donna Shalala, President of the University of Miami and former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Although Hillary Clinton became known as the First Lady of the United States, it was not until she was into her 50s that she was elected a U.S. senator in her own right.

Empowerment is demonstrated not only in the political sphere but in others as well. Take the American painter, Grandma Moses, as she is commonly called. Anna May Robertson Moses was the third of 10 children, and she was encouraged as a child by her father to paint and draw. She worked on a neighboring farm from the age of 12 until her marriage to Thomas Salmon Moses in 1887. While living on the farm that the couple owned and worked together, Grandma Moses decorated certain objects in her home with painted scenes, but it was only in her 70s, with no prior artistic training or formal classes that she started to paint in oils. Her paintings are on display in museums worldwide and have brought her to the forefront as an example of what can be accomplished by women over 50 (ArtCyclopedia, 2005).

According to Pillai (1995), empowerment is an active multidimensional process that enables women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. Empowerment for women involves having a say and being listened to as well as being able to create from a woman's perspective. Empowerment insists that women be appreciated and acknowledged for who they are and what they do. Once recognized, they are more effective in their future endeavors. They develop a capacity to face the social facts of their actual situation boldly. They are able to come to a better understanding of themselves and their circumstances once they examine the truth of their lives. An empowered woman becomes free of social, cultural, and, perhaps most important, psychological barriers (Pillai, 1995).

Just as many individuals are not entirely self-actualized according to Maslow's theory, many individuals also are not fully empowered (Maslow, 1943). There are various steps that women can take in order to become more empowered. Women can

- gain control of our lives (e.g., through sufficient education, self-exploration, finding interests, skill development, choosing a satisfying career and lifestyle, receiving therapy);
- gain awareness about our own situations, our rights, and available opportunities;
- bring our capabilities to optimum use;

- lead fulfilling lives;
- enhance confidence, self-esteem, self-respect, and self-dignity;
- gain economic independence and control our own resources;
- capacity building and skill development, especially the ability to plan, make decisions, organize, and carry out activities;
- learn to deal with the people and situations/institutions around us;
- participate in decision making at home, in the local community, and in the greater society;
- learn from our past and build our future;
- develop an assertive belief system;
- build relationships (e.g., romantic, friendship, career networks);
- move from passive inaction to active participation;
- be able to influence choices and decisions that affect the whole society;
- be organized and gain respect as equal citizens and human beings with contributions to make;
- move beyond ourselves and contribute toward the empowerment of others;
- cooperate with other women toward a common good.

Conclusions

Empowerment is an issue that is relevant to women of all socioeconomic classes, races, and cultures. It is particularly pertinent in any discussion of women at midlife, considering that middle class women of this age group frequently have the necessary capabilities needed to make positive changes in their lives and to turn the balance of power in their favor. There are various steps to empowerment that these women have used. Many have been successful at gaining control of their lives, enhancing their confidence and self-esteem, gaining awareness of their situation, and developing an assertive belief system. However, some women, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status or ethnic minorities who are discriminated against, find themselves in a particularly challenging situation when it comes to empowerment. Societal structures and discrimination make it exponentially difficult, but not necessarily impossible, to follow these steps to empowerment for these women.

One critical component to empowerment is moving beyond ourselves toward the empowerment of others. Empowerment must be viewed not only as personal empowerment, but also as the empowerment of other women. Women must work toward the empowerment of all women, and one way to support this is to cooperate with other women toward a common good. One way that this has been accomplished is through the establishment of groups and organizations that have been constructed to help women empower themselves, such as NOW, AWP, and the Gray Panthers.

In addition, in the political sphere, world policy is finally beginning to support the empowerment of women by encouraging policies that empower women and give them the much needed resources to help fight poverty, discrimination,

and inequality. Women in midlife can be examples of the productive, able, and resourceful qualities that most women possess. With increased support from organizations and government, as well as with the increased cooperative participation of women of all ages, women's empowerment will continue to increase.

Overall, women over 50 are in a prime period in their lives where they can exemplify and expand empowerment for themselves and other women. Now that the children have grown up and left the house, women have more time to dedicate to efforts to enhance their lives and their societies. They also have more financial resources at their disposal and the means to set goals and attain them. This includes an increased sense of confidence, which comes with age and experience. More life experience gives women key assets to learn new strategies and the personal ability to put these strategies into effect. Women over 50 have many key elements in place to continue to promote the empowerment of themselves as well as that of other women of all ages.

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