

## The Evolution of Midlife: Urban Women's Stories of Resilience and Self Discovery

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the often-neglected experiences of women in midlife, aged 35 to 55, examining the complexity of social, psychological, and biological factors shaping this transitional phase. By focusing on social context and historical influences, the study challenges conventional medicalized perspectives on midlife, advocating for a holistic understanding that surpasses traditional viewpoints. Introducing a midlife review process resembling later life reviews, the study uncovers significant life events and their nuanced meanings, providing insights for personalized interventions. Referencing theorists such as Jung, Erikson, and Levinson, the research underscores distinct experiences during the Mid-Life Transition for homemakers and career women. It underscores the multifaceted nature of emotional challenges in midlife, influenced by societal attitudes and individual circumstances. The study advocates for a contextual approach, considering a broader spectrum of life events impacting women's health, including social, cultural, economic, and historical factors. The research highlights the inadequacy of current resources for midlife women, attributing it to biomedical perspectives and a lack of diverse representations in research. By exploring narratives of growth, resilience, and self-acceptance among midlife women, the study challenges stereotypes, showcasing the unique struggles and strengths of this demographic. The findings call for a nuanced understanding of midlife transitions, acknowledging both shared experiences and individualized journeys.

**Keywords:** *Midlife Women, Life Events, Contextualised Approach, Beauty Standards, Ageism and Sexism, Personal Agency*

**T**horoughly unprepared we take the step into the afternoon of life; worse still, we take this step with the false presupposition that our truths and ideals will serve us as hitherto. But, we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning—for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie (Jung 1971).

Midlife is often viewed from a male perspective, focusing on satisfaction and self-realization, overlooking the unique experiences of women. Recent research challenges the notion of static views on women's midlife, recognizing its dynamic nature shaped by social,

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cultural, and economic factors. Regret, a catalyst for change, varies in effectiveness based on age. Sex differences underscore distinct perceptions between men and women. Understanding regret and diverse midlife perspectives is vital for a comprehensive grasp of psychological development. The underrepresentation of midlife women in academia exposes them to stereotypes, impacting self-perception and job opportunities. Research should delve into sociological and psychological aspects, considering ageism and sexism, offering accurate midlife perceptions, and recognizing women's strengths and vulnerabilities.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Midlife, often understood through male-centered perspectives, emphasizes satisfaction, generativity, acceptance of age, and self-realization (Jung, 1971; Erikson, 1964; Levinson, 1978). However, research has neglected the female perspective, depicting women's midlife as tumultuous and emotionally challenging, influenced by societal stereotypes (Daly, 1995).

Recent studies challenge the static portrayal of women's midlife, highlighting its dynamic nature influenced by contextual factors (social, cultural, economic, and historical) (Daly, 1997). Women's responses to midlife, including feelings about aging and ambivalence toward bodily changes, vary widely (Agatha, 1991; Aber et al., 1998; Jarrett et al., 1994).

Psychologists recognize the emergence of "life review" during old age and a self-evaluation period in middle years, revealing unsettling truths about life (Levinson, 1978; Jung, 1954). Levinson's research emphasizes significant reassessment during the Mid-Life Transition, with homemakers experiencing a "rock bottom" and career women seeking measured adjustments (Helson & Picano, 1990; Levinson, 1978).

Regret, seen as counterfactual thinking, motivates behavioral change (Lecci, Okun, & Karoly, 1994). Acknowledging regrets can lead to corrective actions and future planning (Landman et al., 1995). However, regret's effectiveness depends on factors such as age, efficacy, and tendencies towards rumination (Karoly, 1993; Boninger et al., 1994; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994).

Sex differences in personality by Gutmann (1975), Bakan (1966), and Gilligan (1983) highlight distinct perceptions, modalities, and moral voices between men and women. Midlife for men involves a crisis with opportunities for personal growth, while for women, midlife is explored in relation to climacterium and positive development (Levinson et al., 1976; Rubin, 1979; Neugarten, 1968).

In conclusion, regret, sex differences, and midlife experiences underscore the complexity of psychological development. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of regret and considering diverse perspectives on midlife are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of human development to actualize goals.

Research on the experiences of women during midlife is crucial, considering the current lack of representation in academic studies. The absence of such representation makes individual women susceptible to cultural stereotypes and media portrayals, or the lack thereof. Negative images of aging women, such as those depicting unhappy empty nesters, women being replaced by younger counterparts, and challenges associated with menopause and physical changes, can contribute to women internalizing ageist and sexist beliefs about themselves. Limited perspectives can lead to a narrow and restricted view of their future.

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The consequences of the absence of positive portrayals of midlife women are profound. Invisibility and isolation resulting from the neglect of their experiences and untold stories can put midlife women at a disadvantage in a competitive job market.

Addressing the sociological and psychological aspects of women's experiences during midlife is imperative. The research should encompass potential marginalization due to ageism and sexism, impacting women across various economic backgrounds. Equally important is providing women with accurate perceptions of midlife, including aspects they appreciate, find challenging, and the stereotypes associated with midlife women. Understanding the strengths and vulnerabilities perceived by midlife women is essential.

Authors of present study report that participants demonstrated enthusiasm about sharing their experiences, learning from others, and contributing to reshaping perceptions. Moreover, these narratives play a crucial role, not only in offering support to women navigating emotional, psychological, social, and physical transformations frequently overlooked by society but also in empowering women to approach the subsequent phase of adulthood with increased confidence and validation.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The goal of this study is to understand what women experience during midlife. How do they navigate the challenges and opportunities of midlife in contemporary society, considering the changing demographics, gender-specific stressors, and cultural contexts, and what are the psychological, social, and individual factors that influence their perceptions and responses to this life stage?

#### *Aims and Objectives*

The aims and objectives of this study are twofold. Firstly, we seek to investigate the impact of societal attitudes and gender disparities on the varied perceptions of midlife. By delving into how societal norms and gender-related factors shape individuals' perspectives during this life stage, we aim to provide insights into the complex interplay between external influences and personal experiences. Secondly, our objective is to analyze the influence of missed opportunities and the desire for alternative lifestyle choices on the overall midlife experience.

#### *Sample*

For this study purposive sampling method is used. The research participants are midlife women, ages 35–55, experiencing physiological change associated with age and physical attractiveness. The rationale for choosing the criterion of physiological change within this age range is based on Rossi's (1980) recommendation that researchers abandon broad age definitions of the middle years and instead work with periods of physiological change which occur within relatively short time spans. Prospective interviewees were contacted from researcher's social circle through instant messaging services over phone. These messages outlined the intent of the study and included how confidentiality issues would be addressed.

#### *Research Design*

A series of in-depth interviews with participants were conducted. All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis of the data (Spradley, 1979). Through analysis, categories and subsequent themes emerged, representing common threads of meaning among participants' narrative accounts.

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Ten women consented to be interviewed. Good rapport was established with them. The introspective tendencies of this age, noted by Neugarten before, seemed to facilitate the communication, allowing women to reveal thoughts, feelings, and concerns.

All interviews were conducted as free conversations lasting 40-50 minutes. The interviews covered work and life history, including a detailed description of present occupation; family status; coordination of private life and career and conflicts between the two areas; factors affecting development (i.e., role models, norms, and expectations); experiences of discrimination; and their feelings and reactions concerning midlife. All interviewees were asked the same questions in the same order; however, they are free to answer them.

### *Data Analysis*

All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis of the data. Through analysis, categories and subsequent emerging themes representing common threads of meaning among participants' narrative accounts were analysed.

## **DISCUSSION**

Women encounter a multitude of changes during midlife, including shifts in their self-perception. The notion of aging, as outlined in societal beauty standards and the pressure to maintain youthful appearances, often influences women's self-perception and overall satisfaction during midlife. By exploring their attitudes towards aging, this study sheds light on the impact of these societal expectations and how they shape women's experiences.

Additionally, midlife represents a critical juncture for personal growth and self-discovery. The study delved into how women perceive and engage with personal growth opportunities during this phase, exploring the ways in which they seek to fulfill their aspirations and desires.

Furthermore, the changing nature of opportunities in midlife, as mentioned in the loss of perceived youth and certain life choices, is an essential aspect of our inquiry. We investigated how women adapt to these shifts and whether they find new avenues for fulfillment and achievement.

By addressing these questions, we hope to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the midlife experience for urban women.

### *Descriptive characteristics of participants*

SN	Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Education	Occupation
1	Alia	39	Married	4 years of college	Housewife
2	Jasmine	37	Married	More than 4 years of college	Healthcare Professional
3	Lalita	45	Married	More than 4 years of college	Housewife
4	Meera	52	Married	More than 4 years of college	Education Professional
5	Navya	41	Married	Less than 4 years of college	Front desk executive
6	Neelakshi	40	Married	More than 4 years of college	Self employed
7	Shalini	38	Married	More than 4 years of college	Self employed

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SN	Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Education	Occupation
8	Shashi	41	Single	More than 4 years of college	Education Professional
9	Teena	36	Married	4 years of college	Professional
10	Tripti	35	Married	More than 4 years of college	Self employed

### *Self-perception of Midlife*

The women presented their experiences of changes in midlife as complex and bewildering. Although many of the women indicated that they see themselves as more calm, wise and balanced despite the overwhelming responsibilities at either home or work or both (Lachman et al, 2015). The following description obtained during our conversation exemplifies this confusion. Fictitious names have been used to protect confidentiality.

Teena:

*“The age I am in right now. I have no idea how to explain what to even say in which aspect but maybe I was blessed...or maybe I'm not aware. But yeah..... I have seen too many issues. I don't have any issues right now. Life's good.”*

Shalini:

*....there's a monotony in your life. You have done your studies, you've got a job, you're doing good. But still there is a monotony. And you want to do a lot of things, but you see the time crunch.....You are expecting more from your life, but to feel that you are stuck in the home keeping your household going....So you you feel like coming out it and make more of your life.”*

Meera:

*“Its when the it's the most busy part of the child rearing years are behind you and... you're not as youthful as in your 30s or you don't have that kind of energy..... you're fast approaching the time when your maximum life expectancy. So there are a lot of changes in the physical body....your body doesn't recover as much as as fast as it does when it was younger and mentally also kind of coming to terms and accepting these things and emotionally mature and wiser hopefully from what you have learned.”*

Tripti:

*“I think midlife talks about a phase in life...the midsection of our expected life expectancy and probably this is a time when we have matured enough....our ideologies and our thought process probably changes.”*

Jasmine:

*“...we have to balance both the lives professional as well as our family life so sometimes it is like yes, I can say that you feel not confusion basically, you feel tired, or you don't know how to react or how to plan such some things.”*

Neelakshi:

*“A lot of things change for us in terms of thought process become more stable...when you look back, you could have been better you could have been more you could have been wiser when taking those decisions could have been more decisive those kinds of confusions*

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*...overall you become more solid in terms of action and you are more confident in handling life as compared to earlier at the same time."*

### **Societal influence and Gender Disparity**

Societal Attitudes and Midlife Women: The conversations explored on how society often values youth and physical appearance, particularly in women, and how aging can lead to societal expectations related to decreased physical beauty and reproductive capacity (Kilpela et al, 2015). Most participants countered this by highlighting the value of women's central role in their families and the importance of character and behavior. The following individual interview excerpts illustrate this point:

Alia:

*"I feel beauty is there in every age body is getting old but age wise you are learning new things so that adds beauty to your character to your behaviour....physically there are lots of changes....but I feel it is woman in the family is the greatest pillar always supports her family so that matters much more than just looking her physical degradation."*

One participant emphasizes the importance of individual perspectives that while some women may feel pressured to look younger, there is also a movement of women who embrace being comfortable in their own skin and challenging societal norms.

Tripti:

*"What we perceive a major chunk of that comes from the conceptions in general around us about it. Looking older and being older is being looked down upon that shows that it's a problem to age naturally. I feel that there is also this movement...people are just comfortable with how they are and how old they are.....that age is just a number."*

Some participants, by opting not to conform to conventional societal norms, have articulated their individual preferences to reshape beauty standards. Simultaneously, they have raised questions about the dual standards prevalent in society regarding the aging process for both men and women.

Jasmine:

*"Every day on an average anyone ask me that you don't color your hair....this is the main concern people have this is my choice and I don't want to.... so, people usually do not ask the same question again. I don't owe an explanation to them...this is my choice. This is the only thing which I think people are bothered about aging females because if it would have been a male nobody query as such....but with females it is very common."*

A participant openly acknowledges feeling uneasy about societal expectations, citing her personal need for acceptance and appreciation. She describes the pressure to adhere to specific beauty standards, highlighting the internal conflict between her own feelings and external societal norms.

Shalini:

*"I color my hair before I step out, because obviously the people start noticing.... it doesn't hurt but it doesn't feel nice.....you want to feel free. You want appreciation from others. But when you see some signs of aging, in terms of graying or wrinkles, you feel people pointing out flaws in you and then you don't like it."*

A participant mentions that unrealistic beauty standards can be restrictive and narrow, particularly for older women. She shares empowering narratives and highlights the potential for personal growth and achievement at any age.

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Meera:

*"I think it's kind of restricting. I have been reading good stories off late where people well into their old age when certain chapters have closed or when they were drastic changes in their lives who have started doing things that were unimaginable and gone forward. I think it's better to keep a good attitude to the extent take care of yourself so that you're able to do things whatever is necessary."*

### **Gender and Ageing**

The shared experiences and challenges between both genders during midlife underscore the evolving societal landscape where individuals increasingly prioritize overall health, well-being, and personal fulfillment. Both men and women navigate similar transitions, such as settling into their careers, prioritizing family involvement, and assuming responsibilities for aging parents. The impact of societal pressure, particularly regarding marriage and family expectations, influences decision-making for both genders (Thomas et al 2018; Sullivan et al, 2007; Emslie and Hunt, 2008). Two women spoke about this:

Lalita:

*"I feel it is same for males also. Post covid everyone is careful about health. Males are settled in their career by this age. After 40 they become more involved with family and care for aging parents. understand that our parents are getting old and they need our emotional support. We are becoming that support."*

Jasmine:

*"I can see my husband also is struggling with this professional because he's giving time to the family also. I cannot say that only I'm doing the things. So, we both are struggling on the same level. yet in many families....husband is not supporting. He's not understanding the issues. Those females do complain about their issues which happened in their families."*

A notable aspect is the rejection of gender limitations by individuals who emphasize their competence and capabilities irrespective of gender (Questions about culture, gender equality and development cooperation <https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/1850708.pdf>). This empowerment reflects a shift in mindset where personal identity and abilities take precedence over societal expectations. One participant puts her view regarding this.

Teena:

*"...physically, women and men are built differently. So, women age faster with the wrinkles or whatever, and men take a little longer that's there. But that's not something that I feel is in our control. That's like nature. But women not being able to work the way men to that's, I don't believe that."*

However, the conversation also reveals the existence of double standards related to aging. Women, in particular, face heightened scrutiny and pressure to maintain youthfulness and physical appearance (Ponterotto (2016). One of the participants talks about the pressure to maintain socially acceptable looks while acknowledging the self-acceptance shown by few women who do not succumb to societal expectations.

Meera:

*"For looks I think the pressure is definitely more on female....but there are several women nowadays who are embracing those changes also. There are some empowered women who would not go into a trap of simply maintaining a look...just in order to be acceptable to a*

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*male. There are several who will actually embrace their looks and expect their partner to also embrace it."*

Tripti:

*"Nowadays women who embrace being very comfortable in their skin. I mean, I feel that there is also this movement of people are just comfortable with how they are and how old they are."*

The acknowledgment of societal and cultural influences on decision-making processes emphasizes the complexity of individual experiences. The recognition that both men and women face challenges in balancing personal aspirations with responsibilities reflects a common ground, challenging traditional gender roles (Olah, 2018). Two participants shared their personal experiences on taking responsibility and making decisions.

Shashi:

*"I feel more responsible because of being elder in my family and I think just because I am alone, so I feel more responsible towards parents to take care of it's like if I would have been busy somewhere else, then I would not have given much more attention to their health but I'm giving it more with I'm taking it as my sole responsibility."*

Jasmine:

*"...my (female) friends around decisions, even minor decision are affected by their husband's views, their mother's or father's, but I have never felt like that. I really discuss things to decide and choose. I am living my life on my own even decisions related to family, related to my kids, anything."*

The exploration of gender bias further delves into the societal judgment and criticism faced by middle-aged women for choices related to careers, family preferences, and unconventional decisions like separation or divorce (Leopold, 2018). This reflects the perpetuation of stereotypes and the unfair burden placed on women for relationship issues (Kornadt, Voss, and Rothermund, 2013).

The following excerpt highlights how societal norms contribute to gender disparities, with aging females more likely to be questioned or scrutinized, while aging males may be perceived as more successful in their careers.

Neelakshi:

*"Elder males mostly perceived to be smarter and intelligent, not so with older women. They go to places to go out and affairs. I want to do something different, which is what usually happens at this age for men. They decide to do something because they're tired of the job. All the creative freedom they can afford it. But for a woman it becomes all the more difficult when the man of the house decides to do that because she has to balance the family also, she has to take care of the children. If she decides to kind of give it to the choices of the husband, she gives him that liberty in many aspects actually. Also, in jobs. That is how females struggling. Females are having to do the job having to take care of the children. While with men not so many issues with them."*

Cultural and regional factors add another layer to the discussion, with the acknowledgment that traditional beliefs and gender biases may still prevail in certain areas (<https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/1850708.pdf>). Despite these challenges, there is optimism expressed about the progress being made and the importance of prioritizing personal happiness over external judgments. One participant reminisces about experience of observing her mother working at home and work.



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Teena:

*"My mother worked whole day at school, come back to study for her master's. We did not have helpers at that time. She used to cook, she used to do everything. So, the struggles for her much more. I cannot think of how she managed to do all that. I cannot do it. I have all the luxury. I can hire maid here. So, it's definitely different. So definitely society has progressed."*

### **Missed Opportunities**

When asked about missed opportunities in retrospect, participants emphasized the significance of recognizing missed opportunities from the past, attributing them to factors like timing or personal circumstances. In most cases family choices took precedence over career opportunities.

One of the participants mentions that the reasons for not taking the opportunities to move was because her husband was not ready to quit his job and search for new employment. This highlights the challenges of balancing personal and professional commitments when making such decisions.

Teena-

*"...because my husband was not ready at that time to actually quit his job and go along and find something for himself. So that was one opportunity that I missed out...a few years back."*

Another participant mentions that certain compulsions and constraints influenced her decisions of pursuing education of her choice. She indicates that some of these constraints were related to being female, while others were based on personal circumstances.

Shashi:

*"I feel I knew that what I want then...I didn't pursue for that much.... which I chose and that was compulsion in personal life I would have easily come out of it but I got stuck...I did not want it but at that moment that confidence at that moment of time at that point of time. So I accepted it as it is."*

Some of the participants attribute unexpected life events influencing their decisions regarding career related decisions.

Tripti:

*"My daughter was born.... It was unexpected....but I also realized....I wasn't really enjoying the work that I was doing there.."*

She emphasizes the importance of aligning personal interests and values with her chosen profession. By chance and luck, she discovered the education field and felt a strong connection to it.

*"I would have gone into education field much earlier.....perhaps after graduation or maybe school I would have chosen....to get a deeper from much earlier."*

*"I used to feel that perhaps I should have gone into motherhood a little later. Maybe made better decisions regarding my education."*

In some instances retrospection led to the realisation of the importance of personal agency and making decisions based on one's own desires and values.

One participant reflects on how she did not stand up for herself regarding the decision to get married, and she gave in to the fears and expectations of others.

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Neelakshi:

*“My parents wanted me to get married. I didn't want to get married but the kind of fears that everybody around me raised at that point of time that you will have to stay alone you'll get lonely life ....those fears persuaded me to get married.....I gave into that I gave into that whole system of fear.”*

### ***Theme 1 Growth***

As reflected in these narratives the journey of growth began with understanding oneself. This involves recognizing strengths, weaknesses, values, and beliefs. It's about gaining clarity on one's identity, emotions, and motivations.

This theme encapsulates the feelings of holistic growth in fostering the journey of self-discovery, purposeful pursuit, values alignment, and adaptability to change in midlife. As evident from their narratives these women focus on personal growth and self-improvement. They have shifted their priorities from career advancement to studying and learning, indicating a desire for continuous self-improvement. Personal growth involves acquiring wisdom, maturity, and self-awareness through life experiences and reflections, as evident from the response. This includes acquiring new skills, gaining knowledge, and staying open to different perspectives. It involves seeking opportunities for growth and improvement.

### ***Theme 2 Resilience***

Resilience is the unwavering spirit that empowers individuals to navigate through challenging life situations. It's the ability to bounce back, learn, and grow stronger in the face of adversity. The stories shared by participants of overcoming challenges showcase individual strength, courage and determination. By acknowledging the complexities of societal structures, participants shared experiences of positive change. Their stories reiterated that navigating societal dynamics is about breaking barriers, promoting unity, and speaking personal voice.

For urban midlife women, adaptability becomes a powerful tool, allowing them to pivot gracefully through the twists and turns of living. The openness to new experiences fosters the development of skills and strengths that might have remained dormant in more conventional life trajectories. It's about liberating oneself from preconceived notions and societal expectations, forging a unique path that aligns with personal aspirations and desires.

### ***Theme 3 Self-Acceptance***

Narratives shared by participants revealed common theme of self-acceptance into embracing their authentic selves. This profound exploration requires acknowledging not only their strengths but also their vulnerabilities without passing judgment. This journey is characterized by self-compassion, nurturing a deep sense of inner peace, and cultivating genuine contentment.

Through self-acceptance, they can build resilience against societal pressures, creating a buffer that shields them from external judgments. This resilience is a powerful tool, enabling them to navigate the complexities of midlife with confidence and authenticity.

As midlife women in urban settings embrace self-acceptance, they forge a positive and empowering relationship with themselves. This internal transformation ripples outward, influencing their connections with others in the urban community. By fostering a sense of

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acceptance, midlife women contribute to a more inclusive urban environment, breaking down stereotypes and promoting a culture of understanding and support.

Adopting a positive perspective on aging becomes a powerful narrative that transcends societal expectations. This positive approach to aging not only enhances the experiences of midlife women but also contributes to the creation of inclusive societies that honor and uplift individuals at every stage of their life journey.

### CONCLUSION

This study explores the transitional phase of midlife for women aged 35-55, emphasizing the social, psychological, and biological challenges they face. It aims to identify the most significant life events and their meanings, offering insights for tailored interventions. The research challenges medicalized perspectives on midlife, highlighting the importance of social and historical context in understanding women's experiences. A midlife review process is proposed, akin to the later life review, contributing to the midlife crisis. Levinson's observations on homemakers and career women reveal distinct experiences during the Mid-Life Transition. Emotional difficulties in midlife are complex and influenced by various contextual factors, emphasizing the need to consider broader life events impacting women's health. The study argues for a contextual approach, considering social, cultural, economic, and historical influences on women's responses to midlife changes. The study stresses the inadequacy of existing resources for midlife women, attributing it to biomedical perspectives and a lack of diverse perspectives in research. Emotional difficulties in midlife are multifaceted, influenced by societal attitudes and individual circumstances. Recognizing the uniqueness and evolution of women's midlife experiences is crucial. Researchers seek a nuanced understanding of women's midlife transitions, acknowledging both commonalities and unique struggles. Thriving midlife women defy societal stereotypes, balancing increased freedom with identity strength. The synthesis of themes highlights shared experiences and the ongoing quest for balance and authenticity in decision-making amid societal changes.

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