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Q&A: New Book Looks at Black Women As They Age

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African American women are living longer than ever before. Over the past 55 years, their life expectancy has increased more than that of any other group in the United States - an average of 12 years. That is good news for the 6.1 million Black women between the ages of 35 and 59 who were the focus of research conducted recently by the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), which included secondary research analysis, focus groups and surveys. The research revealed, among other things, that Black women were not prepared to live successfully in old age.

NCNW has published a new book, *Tomorrow Begins Today: African American Women as We Age*, eased on its research findings and part of an initiative launched last spring to empower middleaged Black women to improve their health, finances and life satisfaction. Cheryl R. Cooper, 48, executive director of NCNW, recently talked to *The Crisis* about the initiative and other NCNW projects.

Why aren't Black women making better decisions regarding their life?

Our research found - and this is no real surprise - that African American women traditionally have had ingrained in them that our first responsibility is to others. We take care of our families before we take care of ourselves, because to do otherwise is selfish, self-centered. The notion that you need to take care of yourself first is a little foreign to us...This book and initiative give us permission to be wherever we are in life, but to know that we can make a change. We can make a difference in our own lives.

What brought you to the organization?

I was formerly chief of staff with AARP I spent 12 years [there]. AARP is about enhancing the quality of life for people 50 and over. When I was approached about becoming executive director for NCNW, I said, "If I could do that work in a real gratifying way for people 50 and over, why shouldn't I want to do that work for people who are like me - for African American women?"

What is NCMW doing to be relevant to younger Black women?

About a year ago, as part of our strategic planning, we surveyed about 900 women in all age ranges. We asked them what would be appealing to them from an organization like NCNW. One of the things they said is they need a voice. We have a cadre of younger women who understand how the world works in terms of our government and who are aware of the political clout of African American women. NCNW is in the process of creating our Center for Research and Public Policy, which would be an initiative and an area where we could become a voice for Black women politically.

What else is NCNW working on?

We are trying to become more involved internationally. We have an office in Senegal [and] we're trying to expand our international outreach [to] the Caribbean. Our new mission is to lead, develop and advocate for women of African descent, wherever they are.

- interview by Nicole Crawford-Tichawonna

Crawford-Tichawonna interviews Cheryl R. Cooper, executive director of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), about NCNW projects. Among other things, Cooper stresses that NCNW is in the process of creating their Center for Research and Public Policy, which would be an initiative and an area where they could become a voice for Black women politically.

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