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COLOMBO JOURNAL OF
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

COLOMBO JOURNAL OF
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Volume 10 - No. 01 & 02 - March & November 2025

Faculty of Graduate Studies - University of Colombo

Book Review

Mervi Rajahonka, Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha, Miet Timmers, Urszula Załuska, Kaija Villman, Veerle Lengeler, and Tim Gielens, Working Women in the Sandwich Generation: Theories, Tools and Recommendations for Supporting Women's Working Lives, 2022 Emerald Publishing Limited, Pages 160, Price: \$33.99, ISBN 978-1-80262-501-1 (electronic), ISBN 978-1-80262-504-2 (print)

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The working sandwich generation (WSG) has emerged as a topic attracting considerable attention in recent times due to new trends in the demographic environments in workplaces around the world. Despite a substantial body of research examining satisfaction, well-being, and the challenges associated, especially with women in the WSG, contradictory findings persist (Gervais & Milliar, 2024), indicating that this research domain remains theoretically and empirically underdeveloped. The book under review, authored by Rajahonka et al. (2023), fills an important gap in the existing literature by adopting a more practical approach. It offers theoretical approaches such as taxonomies and frameworks, along with practical solutions and recommendations, and tools for supporting women in the WSG. The themes addressed in this book span a wide range, including working women, the sandwich generation, care responsibilities, burnout, and supervisory behaviour. The book is organised into an

Received:
17 November 2025

Accepted revised version:
10 December 2025

Published:
24 December 2025

Suggested citation: Dissanayake, K. (2025). [Working women in the sandwich generation: Theories, tools and recommendations for supporting women's working lives by M. Rajahonka, D. Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha, M. Timmers, U. Załuska, K. Villman, V. Lengeler, & T. Gielens]. *Colombo Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research*, 10 (01 & 02), 58-62.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4038/cjmr.v10i1-2.87>

ISSN: 2362-0633

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introduction and four parts, followed by an index. The four parts, namely, theories, tools and cases, international comparative research, and conclusion, are structured into eight chapters contributed by multiple authors. Each chapter is featured with an abstract, main text, and a list of references. Notably, while each chapter stands alone as an independent research paper, the book maintains coherence and continuity across the chapters, strengthening its argument.

The Introduction is devoted to elaborating the key theme, ‘sandwich generation’, along with the research project background and the structure of the book. It commences with an explanation of the concept of ‘working sandwich generation’ (WSG), with the acknowledgement that it has been defined in various ways. The authors adopt a working definition which identifies three characteristics of WSGs: (a) having dual caregiving responsibilities (for both young and elderly family members) at home, (b) being in middle or older age, and (c) still employed. Recognising that women's representation is high in the WSG, the book focuses on women in this group, emphasising their high risk of withdrawing from the labour market or experiencing burn out at work. The chapter further notes that members of Generation X and Millennials are proven to be becoming WSGs, largely due to factors such as delaying childbearing, children staying longer with parents, and longer life expectancy among older generations. accordingly, the book underscores the significance of managing women WSG workforce. It is noted that the book provides a cross-national comparison based on the research project Time4Help, which examined sandwich generations in Poland, Finland, and Flanders. The criteria used to identify sandwich generations in each of these nations differ, as clearly acknowledged in the introduction. Thus, the differences among the three countries in terms of research focus and subject matter are also discussed here. The research methods and data triangulation techniques are described as well. Finally, a detailed overview of the structure of the book is presented, highlighting the core concepts addressed in each chapter.

In Part One, Chapter One, the authors focus on how members of the sandwich generation manage their jobs while handling dual caregiving responsibilities, and they examine the coping strategies used by WSG individuals in Flanders. The authors appear to hold the view that SGs experience considerable stress and therefore, they require coping strategies to manage these situations. At the outset, they review literature on coping strategies, providing definitions of coping and explaining the role of resources in the coping process. They also present a review of the taxonomies of coping strategies identified in previous studies. The chapter then outlines the methodology adopted, a qualitative inquiry using semi-structured interviews of 34 participants (both men and women). Participant profile and the qualitative analysis are presented. As research findings, nine coping strategies are elaborated, including several newly identified ones. The authors find that some coping strategies overlap or are integrated by WSGs. Based on these results, they propose a new taxonomy and develop a self-assessment questionnaire along with a guide for calculating results, both of which are presented at the end of the chapter. They recommend this taxonomy and self-assessment questionnaire to be used as an instrument for self-orientation.

Chapter Two explores the Polish workplace to understand employers’ perception of mature Polish women (aged 45 – 65) and the perceived attractiveness of these women as employees. The study has adopted both a qualitative (semiotic) and quantitative (computer

assisted telephone interviews) methods to collect data from employers and mature women. Based on the text analysis conducted in the semiotic research, interestingly, the authors identify four ways of schematising mature femininity in the Polish culture, such as independent maturity, enslaved maturity, celebrated maturity, and mounted maturity presented across four quadrants. This framework offers a useful ground for scholars examining the case of working mature women in comparable or adoptable contexts. The authors also highlight that the Polish society tends to stereotype mature women as guardians of health and domestic affairs, rather than as professionals pursuing a career. This observation may be relevant even beyond the European Union (EU) region. I believe this chapter provides valuable insights for research on similar issues in the Asian contexts as well.

Chapter Three focuses on women in the WSG, examining their earnings, learning, and the meaning they attach to work and career. The authors explore how lifelong learning relates to careers, wellbeing at work, and search for meaningful lives of women within the WSG. Data have been collected from female managers and entrepreneurs in Finland through interviews. The chapter is grounded in human capital theory, lifelong learning, and work-family balance. The authors present their findings in a model connecting the three concepts: earning, learning, and meaning to work and entrepreneurship. They highlight that all these concepts are deeply interconnected in women's professional and entrepreneurial lives, arguing that lifelong learning enables meaningful and well-balanced careers and lives.

Part B, Chapter Four shifts the discussion to the role played by the organisations and supervisors (SV), focusing on family supportive supervisor behaviours (FSSB) for SG and the training practices needed to support them in the workplace. The authors draw on the concepts of work-life balance, role modelling, and creative work-family management in shaping the study background. Their findings are derived from a training programme implemented under the Time4Help project. The results are presented in four areas: (a) the specific situation of the WSG and the role of work, (b) ideas for general family supportive practices and policies, (c) an introduction to the components of FSSB, and (d) a self-assessment instrument. Based on these findings, the authors emphasise the need for supervisor training and peer coaching programmes to better support WSG in the workplace.

Chapter five is devoted to elaborating on the Time4Help project, which was implemented in Poland from 2018 to 2022, with reference to its objectives and underlying assumptions. The project was designed to support 'mature women' (age range 45–65). At the outset, the authors describe the project model, which consisted of seven parts to create a support system for mature women. It included the concept of a comprehensive support model, educational activities, a training programme and materials for both key and social competence, entrepreneurship and creativity establishment, an online service, a seminar programme, and a tool for identifying areas for development and competencies to improve. This model was tested in mature women during the Covid-19 period, and the final version of the model was developed after incorporating modifications to the initial design.

Similar to the previous chapter, Chapter Six presents the cases and lessons learned from the Time4Help project implemented in Finland, focusing on the careers, leadership,

entrepreneurship and wellbeing of women aged 45–65. This was done through training and coaching programmes and using study circles. The support systems were specifically directed towards career development, lifelong learning, and networking. The authors describe the concept of study circles in detail and then briefly present five cases, followed by a discussion. They found that empowerment, peer knowledge sharing, and peer mentoring played major roles in all the cases examined.

Chapter seven offers an international comparison across five countries: Poland, Finland, Italy, Belgium (Flanders only), and the United Kingdom. The analysis reveals that welfare state regimes have an impact on how SGs are perceived at the workplace. The chapter also identifies diverse characteristics of SGs using data from a representative group of internet users aged 45 to 65. The differences among SGs were noted in relation to education level, Age group, financial situation, and health status. The study found that women are in a particularly disadvantaged position compared to men in the sample, leading the authors to recommend support systems tailored to strengthening women SGs in these different countries. They also call for further research in this direction.

Chapter eight, the last chapter of the book, presents a summary, an international comparison, and a list of recommendations. The summary provides a coherent synthesis of the preceding chapters, while the comparative analysis highlights differences in the concept of WSGs, as well as demographic, socio-cultural, economic, and state policy differences across the selected EU countries. The chapter shows that even within a single region, significant differences can exist among WSG cohorts, implying that policy recommendations may need to vary by country. The recommendations are directed primarily at policymakers, employers, and training agencies. They cover a wide range of areas, from the job roles and supervisory styles (including the need for family-supportive supervisors at work) to work arrangements (such as flexible and remote work), development and life-long learning opportunities, and health and well-being support. Overall, the authors emphasise the importance of raising awareness about WSGs and recognising the evolving roles of society and the changing roles of women and SGs in ageing societies.

Evaluation

Recent demographic trends show an increasing trend of dependents (aged 0-14 and 60+/65+) in the Sri Lankan society too (DCSSL, 2025). As public and private sector eldercare and childcare facilities remain underdeveloped and widespread (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2021; Gamage et al., 2024), an increasing number of women are voluntarily taking care of both their own children and elderly parents alongside their work responsibilities. This indicates the relevance of the content of this book for the countries experiencing similar demographic trends. However, the text also makes clear that the context, characteristics, and social perception of WSG cohorts vary across nations. Therefore, customising the recommendations to specific social and cultural contexts would be more beneficial. Although this scholarly work has enriched existing knowledge by developing tools, self-assessment questionnaires and taxonomies, the authors make only limited use of existing theories (e.g., human capital, lifelong learning and work-life balance, in chapter three) within their own

frameworks. I believe that future researchers in this area can use social, psychological, and organisational theories of a wider scope when framing their studies to better understand the issues of WSGs in work organisations.

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