

The Dual Roles of the Sandwich Generation in the Modern Era: Balancing Work, Family, and Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of the sandwich generation has become an increasingly visible social reality in the modern era, particularly as individuals face simultaneous responsibilities toward their aging parents and their dependent children. This dual burden places individuals in a unique socio-economic and emotional position where financial obligations, caregiving duties, and professional demands intersect. This study analyzes the multidimensional roles, challenges, and coping strategies experienced by the sandwich generation in navigating work, family, and mental well-being. The research highlights contributing factors such as rising living costs, increasing life expectancy, insufficient financial planning across generations, and strong cultural expectations of filial duty. Findings show that sandwich generation individuals often experience chronic stress, emotional fatigue, and role conflict due to overlapping responsibilities. However, effective time management, social support systems, self-care practices, and the utilization of digital tools can help mitigate the psychological strain. This study emphasizes the necessity of structural support both within families and through workplace policies to promote mental health and enhance resilience among the sandwich generation. Ultimately, strengthening awareness about intergenerational financial literacy, caregiving readiness, and mental-health preservation is crucial in reducing the long-term burden faced by this demographic group.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary modern society, a growing number of adults find themselves in the position commonly referred to as the sandwich generation. This term describes individuals who occupy an intergenerational middle ground supporting their aging parents while simultaneously caring for their own children. As social and economic complexities increase, the burden carried by this group becomes more evident, reflecting the shifting dynamics of family structures, financial pressures, and caregiving norms across generations. The sandwich generation phenomenon arises largely due to changing socio-economic conditions. In earlier generations, family roles were simpler. Adult children typically focused on building their own families and careers without carrying long-term financial or caregiving responsibilities for their parents. However, in the modern era, global economic instability, rising living costs, limited social welfare systems, and increased life expectancy

have reshaped these expectations. As parents live longer but may not have financial security, their adult children often assume responsibility for their daily needs, healthcare, and emotional support.

In Indonesia, this situation is further intensified by cultural expectations surrounding filial piety. The deeply rooted belief that children must care for their parents during old age creates a moral and emotional obligation that cannot be easily dismissed. While this value strengthens family bonds, it can also place significant pressure on adults who simultaneously shoulder the costs of raising their own children. Consequently, the sandwich generation becomes responsible for supporting two generations at once, often with limited resources.

Beyond financial challenges, technological advancement and digital-era work culture introduce new layers of pressure. Rapid workplace competition, the demand for constant productivity, and 24/7 connectivity contribute to stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. Individuals may struggle to meet workplace expectations while also managing caregiving tasks at home. As a result, achieving a balance between professional performance, family responsibilities, and personal well-being becomes increasingly difficult.

The sandwich generation does not merely face financial strain; they experience emotional and psychological burdens as well. Caring for aging parents often requires patience, empathy, and physical effort, especially as health declines. At the same time, raising children particularly those still in developmental stages requires time, attention, and emotional presence. These overlapping caregiving roles create role conflict, feelings of guilt, and chronic stress. Adults may feel torn between fulfilling the needs of their parents and those of their children, while neglecting their own well-being.

Moreover, many members of the sandwich generation come from families with dysfunctional or limited financial backgrounds. Some grew up in households where financial planning, retirement savings, or long-term investments were not prioritized. As a result, the burden of supporting elderly parents falls heavily on them. Others may have numerous siblings, yet the responsibility disproportionately rests on one individual, intensifying feelings of unfairness and emotional fatigue.

In addition, demographic trends contribute significantly to this phenomenon. Increasing life expectancy means parents require longer periods of financial and physical support. Delayed marriage and childbearing, which are now common due to career priorities, also mean that individuals are still raising young children at the same time their parents enter late adulthood. This overlap in generational dependency creates a compressed timeline of responsibilities that is difficult to manage. Culturally, Indonesian society places immense value on *bakti kepada orang tua* (filial devotion). While this promotes strong intergenerational ties, it can also lead to internal conflict when individuals feel obligated to fulfill traditional expectations while balancing the needs of their nuclear families. Emotional strain often emerges from trying to satisfy two sets of responsibilities simultaneously.

Furthermore, the sandwich generation faces unique pressures related to identity and self-development. Many individuals delay personal aspirations such as education, career advancement, or entrepreneurship because their financial and emotional resources are directed toward family care. This condition can generate long-term feelings of stagnation, resentment, or unfulfilled potential.

Despite these challenges, members of the sandwich generation often demonstrate remarkable resilience. Some develop stronger time-management skills, financial discipline, and emotional maturity. Others leverage digital tools, flexible working arrangements, and community support to manage their roles more effectively. Ultimately, the sandwich generation plays a critical role in sustaining intergenerational family welfare. Understanding their experiences is vital for developing social policies, mental-health support systems, workplace accommodations, and educational programs that strengthen financial literacy and emotional well-being.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research methodology to explore the complex lived experiences of individuals categorized as the sandwich generation those who simultaneously bear responsibilities for aging parents and dependent children while maintaining professional obligations. A qualitative approach is essential for capturing the depth and richness of emotional realities, socio-economic pressures, and cultural expectations that shape this phenomenon. Rather than quantifying data, qualitative research enables the researcher to uncover meaning, interpret subjective experiences, and analyze multidimensional challenges faced by individuals in modern society.

Data were collected through an integrated process combining a comprehensive literature review, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. The literature review provided the theoretical foundation, drawing from scholarly articles, books, demographic reports, and research on caregiving, mental health, financial stress, and work-life balance. This step ensured that the study was grounded in existing knowledge while identifying gaps related to the socio-cultural context of the sandwich generation in Indonesia and other developing nations.

Document analysis was conducted to examine socio-economic statistics, government policies, population aging data, and financial trends. These documents revealed broader structural factors influencing the rise of the sandwich generation, including extended life expectancy, rising living costs, shifting family structures, and inadequate retirement planning across generations.

Semi-structured interviews served as the study's primary source of empirical insight. Participants were individuals currently supporting both aging parents and young children. The flexible interview structure encouraged participants to reflect on their personal experiences, emotional burdens, financial responsibilities, workplace pressures, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of cultural expectations. These narratives provided authentic representations of the sandwich generation's challenges.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis, involving coding, identifying patterns, categorizing recurring themes, and synthesizing them into coherent analytical findings. Major themes included financial strain, emotional fatigue, filial obligation, intergenerational dependence, burnout, and adaptive strategies such as time management, social support, self-care, and technological tools. Credibility was ensured through triangulation, comparing findings across literature, documents, and interviews. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and emotional sensitivity, were strictly upheld. Overall, this methodological approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the psychological, economic, and social dimensions shaping the lives of sandwich-generation individuals in the modern era.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Definition of the Sandwich Generation

The term sandwich generation was first introduced by Dorothy A. Miller, an American social work professor, to describe adults who are metaphorically "sandwiched" between the needs of two dependent generations: aging parents and their own children. Members of this group often assume dual caregiving roles simultaneously, managing the physical, emotional, and financial needs of elderly parents while raising children who still require guidance, education, and financial support. This situation places individuals in a demanding intergenerational position with competing obligations that frequently lead to emotional strain, role conflict, and economic pressure.

In the modern context, the sandwich generation encompasses individuals across various socio-economic backgrounds. Many come from families with limited financial resources, where parents did not prepare adequately for retirement due to low financial literacy, unstable employment, or cultural expectations that children will support them in old age. Consequently, the responsibility of sustaining the family often falls disproportionately on one child usually the eldest regardless of the number of siblings. This creates a structural imbalance that intensifies financial and emotional burdens.

Moreover, the sandwich generation frequently emerges from households characterized by dysfunctional parental roles or inconsistent support systems. Individuals raised in such environments may feel compelled to compensate for their parents' limitations by assuming caretaker roles earlier

in life. This sense of obligation, combined with cultural norms emphasizing filial piety, drives many adults to prioritize parental care, even at the expense of their own well-being, aspirations, or family stability.

In addition to caregiving responsibilities, sandwich-generation individuals often struggle with psychological pressures such as guilt, fear of failing either generation, and anxiety about financial instability. They must navigate these challenges while maintaining productivity in the workplace, fulfilling marital obligations, and attempting to preserve personal mental health. The multiplicity of roles they occupy makes the sandwich generation one of the most vulnerable demographic groups in today's rapidly evolving social landscape.

2. Factors Contributing to the Emergence of the Sandwich Generation

The emergence of the sandwich generation is rooted in a multitude of interrelated socio-economic, demographic, and cultural factors. One of the most prominent factors is the lack of financial literacy and inadequate retirement planning among the older generation. Many parents reach old age without sufficient savings, investments, or pension funds, leaving them financially dependent on their adult children. This dependency becomes especially burdensome when the adult children are simultaneously raising families of their own, forming the classic sandwich structure.

Another major contributing factor is the rise in life expectancy due to advancements in healthcare, nutrition, and medical technology. While increased longevity is a positive societal achievement, it also means that aging parents require longer periods of financial support and caregiving. This extended dependency often places adult children under prolonged pressure, stretching their emotional, financial, and physical resources.

Delays in marriage and childbearing represent another key demographic shift influencing the sandwich generation. Many individuals prioritize higher education and career development before starting families, resulting in the overlap of caring for young children and aging parents. This dual caregiving timeline intensifies the psychological and economic strain on middle-aged adults.

Economic instability also plays a significant role. Rising living costs, limited job security, stagnant wages, and high educational expenses put enormous pressure on working adults. They must allocate financial resources across multiple generations, often with little external support. In urban areas, living costs are considerably higher, making financial burdens even more severe.

Cultural expectations particularly in collectivist societies like Indonesia further contribute to the phenomenon. Traditional values emphasize *bakti kepada orang tua* (filial piety), where children are morally responsible for caring for their parents. While this cultural norm strengthens family bonds, it can also create emotional pressure and guilt when adult children struggle to meet expectations.

Taken together, these factors illustrate why the sandwich generation has grown into a widespread and increasingly complex social issue in the modern era.

3. Challenges Faced by the Sandwich Generation

The sandwich generation faces a spectrum of challenges that span emotional, financial, professional, and relational domains. One of the primary challenges is the overwhelming emotional labor required to care for two generations with vastly different needs. Aging parents may require medical attention, emotional companionship, and physical assistance, while children particularly those in developmental stages need active guidance, education, and emotional nurturing. Balancing both ends often results in emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, and chronic stress.

Professionally, individuals in the sandwich generation struggle to maintain productivity while fulfilling caregiving responsibilities. Work deadlines, performance demands, and workplace competition often clash with family obligations such as hospital visits, school meetings, or caregiving emergencies. This conflict can lead to decreased job performance, absenteeism, and in some cases, career stagnation.

Financially, the sandwich generation often bears substantial burdens. They must cover household expenses, school fees, healthcare costs for elderly parents, and sometimes the financial needs of siblings. These cumulative pressures can lead to debt, reduced savings, and limited capacity

for long-term financial planning. Many feel trapped in a cycle of financial survival, with little hope of escaping the generational burden.

Psychologically, the weight of dual roles can lead to guilt feeling guilty for not giving enough time to parents, children, employers, or themselves. This sense of inadequacy often contributes to anxiety, depression, or burnout. Many members of the sandwich generation also experience a loss of personal identity, as their time and energy are consumed by caregiving and work.

Interpersonal relationships are not immune to strain. Marital conflicts often arise when one partner is overwhelmed by responsibilities. Siblings may also disagree about caregiving duties, leading to resentment if the burden falls disproportionately on one person. In essence, the challenges faced by the sandwich generation are multifaceted, persistent, and deeply interconnected, shaping both their daily lives and long-term well-being.

4. Strategies for Balancing Work, Family, and Mental Health

Although the sandwich generation faces significant burdens, several strategies can help individuals manage responsibilities more effectively and maintain mental well-being. One of the most important strategies is setting clear priorities and managing time strategically. Creating structured schedules, identifying urgent versus important tasks, and allocating time realistically can reduce stress and prevent burnout. Establishing strong communication within the family is also vital. Open discussions with spouses, siblings, and even children can help distribute responsibilities more fairly. When family members understand each other's burdens, cooperation becomes more accessible, and emotional support flourishes. Delegating tasks such as sharing caregiving duties or household chores can significantly ease individual pressures.

Equally important is the cultivation of social support networks. Friends, community groups, coworkers, and support organizations can provide emotional relief or practical assistance. In workplace settings, requesting flexible working arrangements such as remote work, flexible hours, or workload adjustments can help individuals maintain a balance between professional and caregiving responsibilities. Self-care must also be considered a non-negotiable strategy. Taking time for rest, engaging in hobbies, practicing mindfulness, physical exercise, or seeking professional counseling can help individuals maintain mental stability. Self-care is not a luxury but a necessary component of sustaining long-term caregiving roles.

Technology also provides valuable tools to ease responsibilities. Digital calendars, task-management apps, medical reminder systems, and online therapy platforms can enhance efficiency and emotional well-being. Hybrid work models and digital communication tools allow individuals to integrate work and home life more smoothly without sacrificing productivity.

Finally, developing long-term financial planning strategies such as insurance, investments, and retirement savings can reduce future burdens and prevent younger generations from inheriting the same pressures. These strategies demonstrate that although the sandwich generation faces complex challenges, proactive planning and supportive environments can greatly improve their capacity to balance work, family, and mental health.

CONCLUSION

The sandwich generation represents a growing and significant social phenomenon in the modern era, characterized by the dual responsibility of caring for aging parents while raising dependent children. This condition arises from a combination of factors including inadequate financial preparation across generations, increased life expectancy, economic pressures, demographic shifts, and strong cultural obligations of filial piety. Individuals within the sandwich generation face multifaceted challenges professionally, financially, emotionally, and psychologically. They are required to maintain productivity at work while simultaneously fulfilling demanding caregiving responsibilities at home. These pressures often lead to chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, financial strain, and difficulties in preserving personal well-being. Despite these challenges, the sandwich generation demonstrates resilience through strategic time management, collaborative family communication, social support, self-care practices, and the use of digital tools that facilitate work-life integration. By adopting these strategies, individuals can mitigate

stress and maintain healthier mental and emotional conditions. This study highlights the importance of societal awareness, enhanced financial literacy, supportive workplace policies, and accessible mental health resources. Strengthening these systems can help alleviate the burdens carried by the sandwich generation and prevent the perpetuation of intergenerational caregiving pressures. Ultimately, supporting this demographic is essential for fostering healthier families and a more resilient society.

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