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Book Part

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Chapter 8

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Sandwich generation (SG) women face the double burden of caring for both their own children, and possibly grandchildren, as well as caring for their elderly relatives. Conflicts and pressures tend to arise and the book provides a range of evidence from the European Union (EU). The concluding part of the book summarises the main results and draws conclusions on the research based on the viewpoints presented in the previous chapters. The chapter presents recommendations for employers, career coaches and policy-makers for supporting SG women in working life.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This book has numerous contributions in the area of working sandwich generation (WSG) research. It explores the challenges faced by sandwich generation (SG) women, aged 45–65, who combine work with unpaid caring responsibilities for both elderly relatives and dependent children. The research was undertaken in Poland, Finland and Belgium in the transnational and interdisciplinary cooperation of three EU-funded projects. The book offers a range of international perspectives on the diverse situations of SG women,

and ways in which they can be better supported by employers, training organisations and policy-makers. It also offers a comparison of the circumstances of SG women and the policy landscape in five countries: Belgium, Finland, Poland, Great Britain and Italy.

The new taxonomy of nine coping strategies presented by Miet Timmers and Veerle Lengeler provides insight into how the WSG combines the dual care task with a job. The WSG always uses multiple strategies, but usually one or more strategies are dominant. The new taxonomy is very consistent with previous strategies by Neal and Hammer (2007), among others. The added value of this taxonomy is that it has been linked to a practical tool that can serve both as a self-assessment tool for the WSG herself, but can also be used as a starting point for coaching conversations and career counselling. Further research should determine which strategies are best suited to increase the WSG's wellbeing.

Chapter 2 by Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and Urszula Załuska indicates that the perception of mature women in Polish society does not favour their professional activity. In Poland, a mature woman is perceived as a guardian of the home rather than someone pursuing a professional career. Mature women themselves also value their family and state of health more than a career. Furthermore, the findings show that women tend to overestimate the significance of their life experience as an argument or reason for hiring them, whereas employers value the flexibility and availability of mature female employees, as well as possible financial incentives from the state. Employers see the need for special training courses for this group, especially related to digital skills. Therefore, this group of women needs support from institutions and training companies to enter the labour market, but it is also necessary to communicate the strengths of mature women as potential employees to employing companies.

The findings of Chapter 3 by Mervi Rajahonka and Kaija Villman also show that women's fragmented careers make lifelong learning necessary for them. Lifelong learning supports both personal development and wider career opportunities. Flexibility is one of the success factors involved in how WSG women can deal with change. Changing situations demand constant evaluations of how to find the best balance between different work–life aspects. Moreover, lifelong learning makes life more interesting and creates a sense of meaning in life and work. Having meaningful work with lifelong learning opportunities is also an important balancing factor for WSG women, improving their wellbeing. Learning to know oneself better offers methods towards a better work–life balance. Lifelong learning creates a virtuous circle in many mature women's lives. Through learning, they manage their jobs better, and

consequently, the job does not consume energy, but on the contrary, releases energy for their private life. Mature women want to contribute meaningfully through their work (see O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005) and search for authenticity, but at the same time, practise relationalism by thinking about how their career choices affect other people around them (see Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). For employing organisations, offering meaningful work opportunities for their mature female employees and advancing their work–life balance establishes a significant competitive advantage that is worth pursuing. However, the study also shows that today's working life does not entirely fulfil the needs and expectations of modern employees, as many of the interviewed women had chosen to become entrepreneurs, because they felt that meaningfulness of work and work–life balance were easier to achieve that way in changing life situations.

In the first chapter of Part B of the book, Miet Timmers and Tim Gielens explore the specific role employers and supervisors (SVs) can play in assisting the WSG find a good balance between work, dual care responsibilities and family. It is argued that proper support for the WSG should include measures of general family supportive practices and policies at the corporate level, combined with SVs behaving in a family supportive way.

Chapter 5 by Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and Urszula Załuska presents the Polish model for improving mature women's employability. They conclude that in training courses for women aged 45–65, it is necessary to build on face-to-face meetings and personal relationships that help them to take up professional challenges and limit involvement in family matters. Another recommendation the authors present is to offer personalised development paths to participants, that is, developing a concept of an individual path of professional and educational activity for a mature woman, both for employers and supporting organisations, and for mature women themselves. In addition, the goals and methods of training should be made clear to the women, as well as the content and usefulness of a given course.

Chapter 6 by Kaija Villman and Mervi Rajahonka shows that tailored training and coaching programmes fit well for mature women. Women were first asked to gather a group of peers with similar interests, and after that, they could co-create the contents and methods used in the training to meet their needs. These programmes are flexible and resonate with the current trends of lifelong learning. For mature women, these groups offer empowerment, learning and knowledge sharing, networking and peer mentoring, enhancing their career development and helping them towards a good work–life balance. Peer groups develop participants' social and cooperative skills and other competences, which are increasingly valued in the labour market, at the same

time valuing and building on the skills and experiences that the participants already have.

Chapter 7 in Part C of the book by Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and Urszula Załuska shows that the situations of SG representatives in the five countries studied are different and the welfare state regime in these countries affects the perception of this group in the workplace. The intensity of SG members in Italy and Poland is stronger compared to Belgium (Flanders), Great Britain and Finland. This indicates greater involvement of middle-aged individuals in looking after people from two generations in countries where the importance of family ties and defined gender and family roles are stronger. However, the situation is reversed when it comes to how the phenomenon is recognised in workplaces. The presented results prove that in countries with a high share of middle-aged people in the SG group, the representatives of this group in the workplace are unrecognisable or even invisible. The study shows that women are more involved in all forms of care for the older generation, except for financial support. The health situation of SG representatives is worse compared to other people. In addition, the financial situation of the WSG is worse compared to other professionally active people, SG women's situation being much worse than men's situation.

To summarise, SG women face the double burden of caring for both their own children, and possibly grandchildren, as well as caring for their elderly relatives. Conflicts and pressures tend to arise in this scenario and the book provides a range of evidence from the EU. Certain policy changes make the book even more topical, such as the promotion of extended working lives and increasing pensionable age. The book offers tools and evidence for improving policy and practice in respect to women working in the SG across Europe, enabling continuing work–life balance and the promotion of economic well-being. It provides a range of international perspectives on the problematic situation of WSG women and how they can be supported in their working lives, as well as rich evidence exploring their real-life scenarios.

Specific coping strategies are uncovered for the WSG. Furthermore, the symbolism of mature femininity is explored, as well as the views of women and employers to allow for comparison. A lifelong learning model is also proposed. Real-life case studies and examples from women's work–life situations are explored. The book provides practical tools, such as a self-assessment tool for the WSG that can also be a starting point for coaching trajectories, suggestions for training for employers, SVs and HR professionals to support the WSG, with a self-assessment instrument to strengthen family supportive supervisor behaviour (FSSB), as well as recommendations for action for SG women, employers and policy-makers. The book has the potential to increase

women's engagement in work but also improve their work–life balance and promote economic wellbeing.

Our international comparative research showed that the whole SG phenomenon is different in different European countries. Explanations include differences in economics, demographics and welfare state regimes as well as underlying values and culture. The concept of the SG is rich and illustrative, but it involves different concerns in different countries. Furthermore, there are different policies, either supportive or less supportive. Different income levels of the SG in different countries lead to different situations, too. In some European countries, for example, in Italy and Poland, many people belong to the SG, but they are invisible because this life situation is considered normal. Elderly people live with them in their homes, and it is not unusual that there are several generations living in the same household.

The different situations reflect the policy-makers' decisions in these countries. For example, in Poland the discussion revolves more around people with disabilities and their situation, not the SG situation. In Finland and Belgium, the SG situation is quite different. In Finland, as in many other Western countries, families are quite small and there are not many siblings to take care of elderly parents, who live longer at home and need more support than before. However, it is typical that elderly people move to care homes when they can no longer live at home.

In Belgium, there is a possibility to make use of leave systems to reduce working hours, in contrast to Poland, with no tradition of part-time work. In Finland and Belgium, end-of-career policies mean that from the age of 60 or 61 years, people can choose to work part time with financial support. Besides differences in part-time work in different countries, part-time work is a gendered issue, women working much more part time than men. In 2020, the proportion of part-time employment and temporary contracts was 7.2% for men while it was 27.7% for women in EU27. The corresponding figures were in Poland 3.2% and 8.8%, in Finland 9.1% and 17.9% and in Belgium, 9.9% and 39.6% (Eurostat, 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS

WSG women generally think their work outside home is important and meaningful. Their work strengthens their self-confidence and confirms that they are productive and active. Their work may keep them from drowning in family care, because by working, they are not only parents or grandparents, sons or daughters, but they can maintain their own identity, independent of the fam-

ily situation. Their work can give them energy and enable them to continue their caring responsibilities. However, their work can also be too demanding physically, timewise or emotionally, leading to burnout, illness or depression. Moreover, many WSG women work in the health and care sectors, and so have triple care responsibilities. Research clearly shows that a job can both give and eat energy. According to our findings, there are several supportive factors enabling SG women to thrive and stay at work, but also factors that make their work more difficult. As an employer or SV, it is therefore important to continue to invest in learning and development opportunities for the SG.

The WSG is an important and attractive group to the three target groups of this book, namely academic researchers, policy-makers and employers. For academic researchers, it constitutes a new area of exploration within research projects, especially primary research in terms of its specificity and diversity in different countries. It is also a potentially new input for training area (content, methods, etc.). From a theoretical point of view, it also has implications for team management styles. For policy-makers, the WSG is a good prospective issue. From the point of view of social policy, the growing size of this group means that policy-makers also have to think about mature families, not just about giving young families a good start. And finally, for the most important practical approach to employers, in-depth knowledge of the specificity of the WSG means the possibility to prepare the company for a boom in representatives of this group in the near future. Baby boomers and Generation X are currently people who are or are approaching the age of 60. They are professionally active people often involved in numerous household duties. This has consequences for management, and above all the need to ensure a policy adequate for all age groups.

Our recommendation for employers is to consider family-friendly workplace strategies and FSSB (read more about them in Chapter 4 by Miet Timmers and Tim Gielens in this book), because taking care of the WSG means taking care of all generations at work. Flexible hours, remote work, etc., benefit all employees. Employers should also offer emotional support. The SG do not always talk about their situation, and therefore they need emotional support and an open culture. This also means that SVs should be role models, in the sense that they should not work weekends, etc.

As recommendations for people of the SG themselves and for employers and SVs, we can say that the success factors based on our research with WSG women, but also all employees at work, include the following:

- Supervisory style, family supportive supervision. It is helpful if WSG women have SVs who offer opportunities to talk about employees' care

and home situation, empathise and give emotional support to them, but also behave as role models themselves in the combination of work and family.

- Suitable job roles, balance of job demands and job control. If WSG women have challenging, 'entrepreneurial' or business development roles and proper career advancement, they stay motivated. Meaningfulness of work can be increased if employees feel that they have control over their work, if they can constantly learn something new, and if they have opportunities to apply their new knowledge and skills.
- Flexibility, flexible timetables and working hours favouring employees. It is important that WSG women have jobs that are flexible enough, allowing to be combined with their caring tasks. Employers have every interest in motivating their most experienced employees to work longer and to give these employees the opportunity to make their own arrangements at work.
- Remote work – when possible – can be an important tool for the WSG to achieve work–life balance. Remote work can also increase efficiency. This applies to all generations of employees, not just the WSG. The COVID-19 experience boosted digital homeworking skills.
- Individualisation of the approach to the path of professional development. No two cases of SG or WSG members are the same. The level of involvement in home care varies, as well as the level of knowledge and skills. When planning a professional development path for women from the WSG, their individual preferences should be taken into account, so as to adjust the planned activities to their needs and possibilities.
- Lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is an important balancing factor for many WSG women. Offering lifelong learning and developing opportunities for employees increases their motivation and feeling of competence and performance at work.
- Health and wellbeing support. Many WSG women are constantly balancing their work and care responsibilities and feel permanent stress. This situation definitely impacts their health and wellbeing. Our international comparative research (see Chapter 7 of this book by Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and Urszula Załuska) also showed that the representatives of the SG had a poorer assessment of their health than other people. Therefore, it is beneficial if employers pay attention to their WSG employees' health and wellbeing and give them extra support.

Barriers to entering the labour force or staying in work include all the above issues when their level does not meet the demands of SG women. In addition, there are barriers in the home sphere that employers probably cannot reach, and here SG women themselves, policy-makers, training and coaching organisations and researchers can offer support for advancing SG women's work–life balance and wellbeing at work and home.

Our recommendation for all the above-mentioned groups is that an increased awareness of the WSG is needed. The WSG is an invisible and forgotten group of people in many contexts. Even these people themselves do not always understand the uniqueness of their own situation. Although the term SG was first used by Dorothy Miller (1981), and since then, in the 2000s, it has received more and more attention from researchers, this topic and the impact a sandwich position has are not yet really understood. This is the case concerning the SG themselves, policy-makers, employers and HR professionals. In this regard, we advocate both public discussion and more academic and practice-based research, dissemination of research and development of concrete tools, training and policies to support the SG.

The recommendations for coaching and training organisations include that, if you want to support the SG, there are different ways to reach them depending on the aim. The aim and methods have to be linked. We have experiences on training and coaching WSG women in three countries. Our common experience is that SG women have a shortage of time. Because of the shortage of time, online coaching may suit them very well. The telecommuting experience during the COVID-19 pandemic greatly increased the online skills of this group in many cases and removed many barriers to online coaching.

The Polish experiments on training and coaching showed that the focus must be on individuals and their individual needs, because this group of women has diverse needs. The Finnish experiments showed that peer learning is important for mature women. They really have much to give and need peer support. The coaching process of three to six one-hour sessions in Flanders showed that individual coaching processes in which SG women are guided to determine their own goals in the field of work, personal development and managing the combination of dual care with a job, and in so doing starts to determine concrete strategies, are experienced as very useful.

In addition, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) could offer peer support and study groups and a voice to this group. The situation of the SG is complex, and the first step is that the people belonging to the SG recognise themselves. Secondly, NGOs could offer concrete examples of how this group is taken into account in organisations, what kind of roles they can take, etc.

For policy-makers, we would like to point out that besides awareness raising about the SG as a group in society, its recognition in national and international policies is also needed. The SG is a good prospective issue for policy-makers, because its importance is rising, with the future growth of this group. Therefore, societies but also employers need to take the SG into account. Currently, many of the SG belong to the Baby boomers or Generation X. After them, the next generations are smaller, and there are fewer people to take care of the elderly. It will be an unbearable situation, and will reveal the huge amount of unpaid work in society currently done by the unpaid SG. It would be worthwhile estimating the value of this unpaid work in monetary terms to make it visible.

In fact, we could say that even though the number of people belonging to the older generation is increasing, the group of WSG women consisting of Baby boomers and Generation X is a pioneer generation in many respects. They were the first generation of women widely to enter the labour market, and now they are the first combining their work with taking care of the elderly. They were the first WSG, but they might even be the last WSG, if the next generations are not encouraged and supported to take on these responsibilities.

Furthermore, our recommendation for policy-makers includes that they should think about who is included in support schemes. Not only young parents have to combine work and family, but policy-makers should also consider the older generation where the SG can be in challenging situations. There should be a European strategy for the SG. European policies still handle the WSG quite differently than parents with young children. Just recently, a directive ensuring five days of unpaid leave for employees taking care of their relatives other than children was issued. The policies could also offer free time for the WSG, by offering day care activities for the elderly.

Another option is that grandparents could be offered grandparent's leave. Many working grandparents want to be able to help out occasionally with the care of grandchildren. The current leave systems and social leave offer few possibilities for this. We advocate the introduction of grandparent leave, a form of time credit that grandparents can use in a flexible way to care for their grandchildren. In addition, the possibilities of social leave could also be extended to grandparents. Currently, social leave only applies to 'compelling reasons' for mostly resident family members. An extension would give more leeway to the SG and young families. This would offer solidarity, taking into consideration that WSG women – when they had small children – did not usually have long maternal or parental leaves, and now have to work for longer as the retirement ages keep rising. However, caring for

grandchildren must be a non-binding choice. This is only possible if there are sufficient childcare facilities. Here, a number of obstacles remain. There is not sufficient pre-school childcare everywhere. Moreover, there is a permanent need for childcare during school holidays. Sufficient and high-quality childcare is not only important for young families but also for the SG.

Society has to admit that it is positive for people belonging to different generations to take care of each other, but this has to be voluntary. To make sure it is voluntary, it is important to offer professional help to support the WSG to guarantee that those people themselves who take care of their loved ones stay healthy. Informal care is a free choice of the informal carer and the person receiving care. It remains important to safeguard this voluntariness in the context of the socialisation of care. This requires sufficient support for caring families. There must be sufficiently developed, accessible and affordable care for the elderly, both at home and in the residential sector. Informal carers must be able to leave their caring duties behind from time to time. Sufficient possibilities for respite care, holiday possibilities and psychological support, for example, are necessary.

The COVID-19 time was very exceptional for many people of the WSG, leading to even more stressful situations. This generation is a link between different generations, but there were situations where they could not meet their parents or grandparents living in care homes, or their children or grandchildren. Some WSG parents had to work at home while at the same time supervising their children in their remote schoolwork. In addition, many sectors in which numerous women work were highly affected by COVID-19, including health and care, with more pressure and workload, but also the hospitality and cultural sectors with diminished or no income. Therefore, the economic impacts of COVID-19 have been named 'She-session' (Alini, 2020).

Due to the ageing of societies, changes in family models, increase in the professional activities of women and the extension of the period of professional activities, for the first time in history we are dealing with such a high intensity of the WSG women phenomenon. More and more often we meet working grandmothers who are trying to combine professional duties with fulfilling social and cultural roles assigned to them. A special group here is made up of women who look after people with disabilities, including their own children or parents. And this is a group that should be helped if we want its representatives to stay in the labour market and take care of their next 10, 20 or 30 years of life. For now, in countries such as Poland people belonging to the WSG are transparent, unnoticed by the environment, because caring for family members from the older or younger generations is normal. This is not a group that asks for social help, because if they do ask, they only ask

for support for their expenses. The WSG is a group of people dominated by women and who more or less voluntarily support other people, often giving up their health, development or professional career, and finally their financial situation. It would be worthwhile for the WSG to become visible to decision-makers and designers of social solutions.

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