

## Exploring Challenges of Working Sandwiched Mothers and Organization Support

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### Abstract

The multigenerational commitments and obligations of working mothers who are sandwiched between caring for their children and elderly family members jeopardize their ability to maintain role balance. Previous research on the topic, particularly in a Malaysian context, is limited. This qualitative study aims to address this gap by examining the challenges faced by seven working sandwiched mothers in Malaysia and the social support provided by organizations as they navigate multiple roles as caregivers, spouses, parents, and employees. Specifically, the study investigates (1) how these women manage their combined responsibilities and (2) what types of organizational support are available to them. Drawing on Conservation of Resources theory which emphasizes protecting one's resources from depletion or loss; we found that emotional stress, work-induced stress, and financial constraints pose significant challenges for these individuals. Although flexibility is crucial for managing competing demands effectively, our findings suggest that organizations do not offer enough support in this regard. Overall, our study illuminates the experiences of working sandwiched mothers facing complex role conflicts while highlighting the need for workplace policies that prioritize their well-being.

**Keywords:** Working Sandwiched Mothers, Stress, Financial, Flexibility, Malaysia

### Introduction

In previous decades, women who wedded typically focused on domestic duties rather than pursuing a career. Traditionally, they were responsible for childbearing and rearing while men served as the family's breadwinner. However, in recent years this situation has changed markedly. According to data from the World Bank (2022), more than 50% of women worldwide participate in the labor force. The gender gap in workforce participation is narrowing significantly, with women no longer confined to homemaking roles and men not solely responsible for supporting their families financially.

Malaysia's population has surged over the past two decades; it now stands at 32.7 million as per statistics released by Malaysia's Department of Statistics (2022), up from 23.3 million in 2000. This growth, coupled with rising social and economic demands within Malaysia, is reshaping traditional family structures across the country. As time goes on, we see more Malaysian women choosing to pursue careers or returning to work after childbirth instead of restricting themselves solely to domestic responsibilities - a trend that has directly contributed to an increase in dual-income households within Malaysia (Tey et al., 2015). Other family structures such as commuter families and blended families consisting of "Sandwich" families ("Touch n Go" or "Double Income No Kids") have also emerged since the early 2000s. Due largely to cultural traditions throughout Asia but particularly so within Malaysia - along with improved access to healthcare services - Sandwich Families are common there: these are households where members care both for children and elderly relatives alike

With the surge in female labor force participation in Malaysia, which currently stands at 55.5% as per data from the Department of Statistics (2022), it becomes imperative to emphasize the importance of maintaining role balance for individuals belonging to the sandwich generation who shoulder multiple responsibilities. It is noteworthy that limited research has been conducted on this topic pertaining to working women from sandwich generation samples in Malaysia, with most studies being carried out in Western countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States of America (Daniel, 2010; Del-Pino-Casado et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2016a; Evans et al., 2016b; Rubin & White-Means, 2009). While a few studies have been cited in Asian countries including Malaysia by Jane et al (2013); Ng et al (2018) Ahmad and Abdullah (2013), significantly more work remains to be done on this subject matter.

This study aims to explore challenges faced by working mothers who belong to the sandwich generation within Malaysia specifically. The following questions will guide our inquiry: Firstly - What are some prevalent issues encountered by these mothers? Secondly - How organizations are supporting these women?

The study is significant in several ways. Firstly, this study contributes significantly towards existing literature on work-life balance, gender roles, and organizational support which researchers can build upon further. Furthermore, the significance of theoretical frameworks like Conservation Of Resources (COR) theory will aid understanding dynamics around work-family conflict and support.

Secondly, organizations and HR practitioners can gain valuable insights from this study regarding the specific needs of working sandwiched mothers. Understanding the challenges these women face when juggling multiple roles allows organizations to tailor their policies and practices accordingly.

Thirdly, policymakers and government agencies could benefit from these findings since they highlight how important it is to support working sandwiched mothers. This may result in creating policies or initiatives aimed at assisting this demographic group. Policymakers can promote gender equality, in line with SDG goal 5, and Malaysia National Family Policy (2010), while achieving economic stability through giving priority to working sandwiched mother's well-being.

## **Literature**

### **Challenges Faced by Working Sandwiched Women**

Women who find themselves sandwiched between caring for children and elderly family members while also working face a multitude of challenges in their daily lives. These challenges include balancing the demands of their different roles, managing financial stability, and finding time for personal leisure. The difficulties of multigenerational care have been found to impact career development and overall quality of life (Riley & Bowen, 2005; Rubin & White-Means, 2009). Financial strain is also a common issue faced by caregivers due to expenses related to caregiving as well as unpaid labor (Wang & Wu, 2018).

Despite these obstacles, some women are able to achieve positive role balance which leads to decreased role strain and depression (Riley & Bowen, 2005). However, negative consequences such as poor health outcomes and limited free time are still prevalent among this group (Dhar, 2012; Wang & Wu, 2018). Interestingly though, those who provide elderly care may experience improved well-being despite the added responsibilities.

In summary, the multiple commitments faced by working sandwiched women present unique challenges that require careful navigation in order to maintain optimal functioning across all areas of life.

### **Social Support for Role Balance**

Employees are more susceptible to experiencing role imbalance in the absence of organizational support, as such support is crucial for balancing their work roles. As per experts (e.g., Bosch, Heras, Russo, Rofcanin & GrauGrau., 2018; Kossek & Lautsch; 2018), women can benefit from co-worker and supervisor support that helps them manage multiple roles. Employees, particularly sandwiched working women, must be given an opportunity to voice their opinions on working conditions, management, and well-being since it facilitates creating favorable work-family policies by the human resource team.

A family-friendly policies can enhance job performance and satisfaction while reducing turnover rates besides fostering employee loyalty towards the organization (Ireson et al., 2016; Kumari & Devi, 2013; Purohit, 2013). Organizations can offer social support to help working sandwiched women balance multiple responsibilities with flexitime options to work remotely or friendly leave policies like maternity leave or day-care centers besides financial and non-financial rewards (O'Sullivan, 2014).

Although caregiver-friendly workplace policies are scarce in Malaysia's organizations' context yet family-friendly programs/policies aid working sandwiched women balance their roles. Even before COVID 19, Malaysia's multinational companies, implement such initiatives realizing they contribute significantly towards achieving higher productivity at work by prioritizing successful balancing of employees' demands concerning personal life/work-life balance. Nestle Berhad being a case in point offering remote/flexible arrangements along with mentoring/extended primary caregiver leave child adoption/dedicated nursing mother facilities ("Nestle (Malaysia) Berhad", 2021). Another example is Citibank Malaysia promoting "Citibank's Flexible Work Strategies" supporting female workers' work-life balance via flexible hours/remoteness/compressed week/job sharing/part-time/leave of absence ("Family-friendly companies to work", 2017). Similarly, Public Bank Malaysia introduced wellness

programs enhancing its staff quality/wellbeing via flexible arrangements (Public Bank Berhad Annual Report, "Public Bank Wellness Program", p.64).

Social support is essential among strategies for addressing role imbalance experienced by working sandwiched women within organizations where employers play a significant part in designing social support aimed at ensuring these individuals' well-being at workplaces. Numerous Malaysian big organizations have adopted social-support initiatives showing promise toward keeping highly skilled females employed within the workforce.

### **Underlying Theory ~ Conservation of Resources Theory (COR)**

The theoretical framework employed in this study is the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, a motivational construct that posits individuals are motivated to safeguard their current and valued resources while also seeking out new ones. The COR theory emphasizes the importance of resource protection (conservation) and acquisition for individual well-being. According to the COR theory, loss or scarcity of resources can lead to negative outcomes such as stress, burnout, work-family imbalance, or role dissonance (Hobfoll, 1989). This investigation focuses on studying the role balance of working sandwiched women; thus it relies upon COR theory as its guiding principle. By reiterating how various resources from the elderly caregiving process and social support impact coping strategies and role balance among working sandwiched women, this statement lays an essential groundwork for our study.

### **Methodology**

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design to investigate the multifaceted narratives of working mothers in the sandwich generation with regards to their challenges in balancing various responsibilities and the support they received. A qualitative descriptive design is characterized by its descriptive nature (Polit & Beck, 2014) and is well-suited for research questions that aim to uncover unknown aspects or experiences related to who, what, and where events (Kim et al., 2017, p.2).

The focal population of this study was comprised of working mothers in the sandwich generation residing in Malaysia. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method based on specific inclusion criteria: (1) female gender; (2) paid employment requiring at least 40 hours per week; (3) cohabitation with at least one dependent child and elderly individual such as parents, parents-in-law, grandparents or other relatives; and finally (4) unpaid caregiving for elderly individuals. Snowball sampling was chosen due to its effectiveness in reaching out to this elusive population of working mothers living under challenging circumstances.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews conducted using an interview guide designed by researchers available in English, Malay and Mandarin languages which focused on role balance among these sandwiched mothers. With participants' consent obtained beforehand, all interviews were audio-recorded before being transcribed verbatim for analysis using content analysis methods involving various stages like reading transcripts multiple times for meaning identification followed by coding units into categories leading ultimately towards drawing conclusions as depicted through Table 1 illustrating our analytical process.

Table 1

Data Analysis Process

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning units	Codes	Categories
<i>...My emotion is easily affected by them as the burden of staying together with them is relatively large. They are the elderly, so they tend to place their old mind-set on the younger generation. The burden of not fulfilling their life expectation is relatively high (I1)</i>	Emotion affected, burden to fulfil elderly life expectation	Emotionally affected	Emotional stress
<i>My boss understands my situation .... He allows me to work half-day but with full time workload and working hours. I am given flexibility in managing my work schedule too if I have to leave earlier due to family matters.... (I2)</i>	Employer understands situation, gives flexibility to manage work schedule and hours, allows to leave earlier due to family matters	Work policies	Flexible work arrangement

**Result & Findings**

**Demographic Profile of the Informants**

A total of seven informants were interviewed. The demographic background of the informants is illustrated in Table 2. All the informants were full-time working women who were also the mothers and caregivers to their parents or parents-in-law at the same time.

Table 2

Demographic Profile of the Informants

Informants	Demographic Profile			
	Age	Race	Marital status	Occupation
1	34	Chinese	Married	Admin clerk
2	52	Chinese	Married	Account assistant
3	40	Chinese	Married	Accountant
4	56	Iban	Married	Nurse
5	42	Chinese	Divorced	Assistant account manager
6	28	Malay	Married	Life planner
7	45	Chinese	Married	Tax auditor

**Family Situation of the Informants**

Table 3 displays the intricacies of the informants' familial circumstances. All participants belonged to the sandwich generation, wherein they were responsible for their own families

while also caring for dependent children and elderly parents or in-laws. Each informant dutifully provided comprehensive support for their elderly, including daily necessities and sustenance via daycare assistance, medical care by accompanying them to hospital check-ups and administering medication, financial aid as needed, and emotional companionship.

Table 3  
*Family Situation of Informants*

Informants	Family situation	Support provided				
		No support	Financial support	Healthcare support	Day care support	Companionship
1	Husband, son, and daughter, parent-in-law	x	x (spouse)			
2	Husband, the youngest daughter, mother-in-law		x	x (spouse)	x	
3	Husband, son and daughter, parent, younger brother		x	x	x	
4	Daughter, mother		x	x	x	
5	Son, mother		x	x (exclude medication and check-up fees)	x	x
6	Husband, children, parent		x	x	x	
7	Husband, daughter, mother (on weekdays), mother-in-law (on weekends)		x	x	x	x

**Main Findings and Discussions**

**What are the challenges of working sandwiched mothers in Malaysia?**

The present investigation has demonstrated the challenges faced by working mothers who find themselves sandwiched between their various responsibilities. This inquiry identified several impediments that are in line with previous research studies. The primary findings showed emotional strain, tension related to work, and financial pressure as significant obstacles. The results indicated that participants 1, 2, 4, and 6 experienced emotional distress while attempting to balance their diverse obligations. This discovery of emotional stress encompasses different parenting approaches (1), relational discord between the caregiver and elderly individual (2), as well as the inability to meet caregiving expectations from the elderly person (4,6). As described by one informant, *“...our different lifestyles and mindsets bring a lot of friction in our daily life. Like how I teach my children is somehow different from their way of teaching them ...It affected my role as a mother...it made me feel like I have no right to teach my children” (I1)*

Based on the findings, it was revealed that working sandwiched women encountered difficulties in balancing their various roles. The discovery regarding this specific group of women is consistent with Boyzcuk and Fletcher's (2016) assertion that the sandwich generation, which includes working mothers who are also caring for elderly relatives, experiences emotional stress due to their multigenerational responsibilities and "sandwiched" situation. The expectation of fulfilling the demands of being a mother, wife, caregiver to an older relative, and employee resulted in heightened emotional strain. Working sandwiched mothers bear a heavy burden as they juggle multiple roles simultaneously. Despite disputes and conflicts within families, there were instances of intergenerational harmony characterized by mutual affection, interaction or support between both generations (Clarke et al., 1999).

Similarly, in pursuit of role equilibrium, respondents 3 and 5 encountered obstacles such as work-induced strain. This observation aligns with the findings of Boyzcuk and Fletcher (2016) who noted that working mothers sandwiched between professional demands and caregiving responsibilities were prone to experience job-related stress due to the challenge of balancing their personal and professional spheres. The research further revealed that these women faced additional difficulties including unexpected absences from work, failure to meet deadlines, missed opportunities for career advancement, and a demanding workplace environment, as described in the excerpt *"Because I need to take leave, like sometimes, for a family matter, so I might normally miss part of the work in a day or few days. Plus, I lost my job promotion recently as my boss prefers someone who hasn't married or doesn't have kids or family members to take care of"* (I3).

Informants 2 and 5 encountered financial strain as one of the obstacles in juggling their multiple roles. The inability to maintain financial stability aligns with Riley and Bowen's (2005) and Dhar's (2012) research, which concluded that the sandwiched generation faces challenges in handling their finances. This finding is consistent with Wang and Wu's (2018) study, where they found that informal caregivers incur hidden costs such as out-of-pocket expenses, employment-related expenses, and unpaid labor when fulfilling elderly caregiving responsibilities leading to financial strain. The most relevant cost here was the out-pocket expenditures, as mentioned by informant 2, *"... finances are a bit tight as compared to the previous years due to the increased number of family members and another related cost"*. Working mothers who find themselves sandwiched between the responsibility of caring for their families and increasing daily expenses, unavoidable school fees, as well as hidden costs that may go unnoticed, experience financial strain. This condition makes it difficult to maintain financial stability, especially for middle or lower-income families (Wang & Wu, 2018). It is important to note that financially stable working mothers do not face such a strain and are better able to achieve balance in their roles.

#### *How does the organization support working sandwiched mothers?*

The results indicated that working sandwiched mothers received inadequate social support from their respective organizations. The assistance provided was limited to flexible work schedules and lunch breaks, while other interviewees expressed a desire for additional forms of support such as flexible hours, family-oriented events, and stress management initiatives. The findings on the social support by organizations suggest that there is a lack of support from the organization. The findings indicate that most organizations have neglected the importance of organizational support to their employees. This is evidenced by the statements provided by informants 1, 3, 4, and 5, in which respectively like *"...the first thing they prioritise*

*is your work performance; second is money. There is nothing more important than money in a private company, especially a small company like us” (I1); “...is it offers in every company?” (I3), “...they don’t even offer any work-life balance support or initiatives” I4; and “...so far, no. What they focus are money and only money” (I5).* Nevertheless, this discovery opposes the research conducted by Kumari and Devi (2013), who contended that neglecting to provide support for employees could result in lost opportunities for employers, including retaining highly skilled personnel and raising productivity. A more credible rationale for the absence of social assistance provided by organizations is that a significant number of companies employing sandwiched women are smaller in size; thus, their proprietors may not deem it necessary to extend social support to their staff.

To support Malaysia's Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (SPV 2030) in accordance with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDG 2030), as well as Malaysia National Family Policy 2010, it is imperative that organizations ensure their employees are working in a healthy state and promote well-being for all, regardless of gender or job level. The study revealed that working sandwiched mothers strongly emphasized the importance of social support within an organization; however, one informant was content with the current situation, stating that it is up to individual employees to find balance between work and personal life domains.

In order to help these individuals achieve a better work-life balance, most informants suggested flexible work arrangements as the most suitable form of social support offered by organizations. They claimed such arrangements helped ease conflicts between their professional and personal lives and allowed them to maintain role balance, leading them to stay committed to their employer over time. According to O'Sullivan (2014), flexible scheduling helps those belonging in the sandwich generation manage multiple responsibilities effectively.

Furthermore, studies have shown that implementing effective social support programs can lead to long-term benefits for both employees and employers alike: attracting highly qualified staff members while fostering loyalty towards an organization (Ireson et al., 2016; Kumari & Devi, 2013; Purohit, 2013). This has been demonstrated successfully by some of Malaysia's top-tier companies including Nestle Malaysia (2016); Citibank Malaysia (2017) and Public Bank (2018), which offer flexible work arrangements as part of their retention strategy, long before COVID 19 pandemic.

Apart from flexible scheduling options being proposed by working sandwiched mothers themselves as means for achieving better role balance at home/work spheres - another suggestion given was stress management programs provided by employers. This idea aligns well with Michie's research findings on organizational stress management interventions aimed at reducing employee workload stress levels thus improving overall wellbeing while promoting sustainable workforce practices focused on achieving optimal performance outcomes across various industries/sectors worldwide.

### **Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and Role Balance**

This study utilized the COR theory to establish the basis for stress and negative outcomes experienced by sandwiched working mothers. The theory posits that individuals experience stress as a result of stressful events in their daily activities when they face the potential loss of resources and fail to obtain any new ones (Hobfoll, 1989). The results regarding challenges



faced by sandwiched working mothers in balancing multiple roles align with COR theory. These women experience emotional and work-induced stress, with elderly caregiving being one of the identified stressors based on COR theory, resulting in a lack of "personal and quality time with loved ones." This can be attributed to an inability to balance numerous demands effectively, leading to role imbalance.

COR theory also highlights social support's importance for achieving role balance among working sandwiched women. Previous studies have suggested that social support helps reduce negative effects from both work- and family-related stressors (Ford et al., 2007; Kossek et al., 2011), making it crucial for these women who receive social support at their workplace to attain role equilibrium. Social support serves as a resource consistent with COR theory since it aids in providing, acquiring, and preserving valuable resources while contrasting against stressful situations (Hobfoll, 1989).

In summary, this study's findings underline how sandwiched working mothers strive to safeguard their resources while managing multiple roles through using the principles established by COR Theory.

### **Conclusion and Implication**

The investigation into the challenges faced by working mothers who are sandwiched between caring for their children and elderly relatives, as well as the organizational support they receive, is crucial and advantageous to multiple stakeholders. Firstly, this study focuses on the specific obstacles that these women face in order to help them realize that they are not alone in their struggles. By identifying common stressors such as emotional distress, work-induced stress, and financial strain, this research validates their experiences and provides recommendations for potential coping strategies. Moreover, by emphasizing the importance of organizational support, it assists working sandwiched mothers in advocating for supportive policies and practices within their workplace.

To conclude, the research into challenges experienced by sandwich generation mothers alongside organizational support is essential and beneficial for a diverse range of stakeholders. This includes women, organizations, policymakers and academic communities. To achieve greater gender equality, work-life balance and overall well-being addressing specific needs amongst working sandwich generation mothers and promoting supportive policies/practices is imperative.

Thus, the first significant practical contribution made here provides empirical data demonstrating role balancing undertaken by working sandwich generation mothers compared to previous studies primarily focused only on elderly caregiver roles. Additionally, this study explores social supports provided by organizations enabling working sandwich generation mothers attain role balancing.

Secondly, the implications drawn here serve useful practical applications for HR practitioners helping identify talent retention approaches. This enables HR practitioners understand expectations/needs of working sandwiched mother's attaining role balance. These value-added social supports like flexible work arrangements encourage working sandwiched mothers engagement/productivity at workplace. Stress management and time management programs must be implemented too.

In summary, sandwich generation women encounter various issues ranging from emotional stress, to financial strain. It's critical that organizations implement social supports such as flexible work arrangements & stress management programs aiding sgms attain role balancing.

Future research focusing different samples shedding light on role balancing/sandwich generations necessary. Limitations due informants' occupations suggest future research focus solely professional women who experience heavier workload/stress. Interview questions ought cover all four roles: Mother, wife, elderly caregiver and employee

Since this study is restricted to working mothers from the sandwich generation who have combined roles, future studies should focus on working sandwiched fathers as samples. Working sandwiched fathers might provide unique insights into their consequences, difficulties, and coping strategies of role balance. Future studies will be most productive if they subsequently explore how social support from the organization might help them balance their multiple roles.

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