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# WORKING WOMEN IN THE SANDWICH GENERATION

Theories, Tools and Recommendations for  
Supporting Women's Working Lives

MERVI RAJAHONKA, DOROTA  
KWIATKOWSKA-CIOTUCHA, MIET TIMMERS,  
URSZULA ZAŁUSKA, KAIJA VILLMAN,  
VEERLE LENGELER AND TIM GIELENS

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THEORIES, TOOLS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR  
SUPPORTING WOMEN'S WORKING LIVES

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# INTRODUCTION

*Mervi Rajahonka, Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha, Miet Timmers, Urszula Zaluska and Kaija Villman*

## ABSTRACT

*People with a dual care task at home, taking care of a younger and an older generation family member, are often called the sandwich generation (SG). They are more often women than men, at high risk of burnout or withdrawal from the labour market. This book provides international comparisons and offers tools for working sandwich generation (WSG) women and their supervisors for managing challenging situations in working life. The book is multidisciplinary and combines theories with qualitative and quantitative empirical research, practical tools and case studies. This chapter introduces the themes and relevant concepts of the book and presents its structure.*

## 1. SANDWICH GENERATION

Although there are different definitions for the sandwich generation (SG), it is usually referred to as

*individuals or couples within the age group 45 to 65 who, in addition to their work activities, also take care of their own (young or growing up) children together with the care of their ageing parents. (Bronse laer, 2016)*

Another definition states that ‘the sandwich generation refers to individuals who, by dint of circumstances, find themselves in the position of being caregivers for their young children, and/or adult children and care for one

or both of aging parents' (Chisholm, 1999, p. 178), whereby the working sandwich generation (WSG) is squeezed between the needs of children, parents and workplaces (Burke, 2017, p. 3). The traditional sandwich analogy is taken even further by some authors, creating terms such as the club sandwich to denote the group of people who care for their grandchildren and an older generation and the panini sandwich for people who care for an (adult) child with a disability and member of an older generation (Abramson, 2015). In other words, the SG has a dual care task at home caring for an older and a younger generation at the same time.

The concept of the SG was introduced in by Dorothy Miller (1981) to portray women in their 30s to 40s who were caring for their young children and ageing parents. Nowadays, the SG has become older, the largest age group being older than 40 years, and the definition includes both genders, as men can also have dual care tasks. Further, before, the biggest group of people belonging to the SG were Baby boomers, but after that Generation X, and soon the Millennials will take over (Parker & Patton, 2013).

It is obvious that due to demographic trends and longer working lives, the number of people in the sandwich position is expected to rise. There are several reasons to assume that the WSG will grow in the future. People delay childbearing, children stay at home longer and the older generation is living for longer. With governments facing challenges in the presence of ageing populations, public policies in many countries are offering fewer care home places to the older generation, leading to the older generation living in their own homes for longer. At the same time, SG people retire later and work for longer. Various policy measures such as pension reforms in European countries are resulting in more people over the age of 50 remaining in the labour market. This means that the number of SG people who still are working is increasing, too.

The gender gap (men working longer) of older workers in employment is narrowing in some countries, although it remains robust in others (European Commission, 2020; Zamarro, 2020). Where in 2000 in EU27 48.8% of the male population between 55 and 64 years was working compared to 27.8% of women, the employment rate had risen to 69.6% for men and 55.4% for women by 2019. Participation in the workforce by older workers is expected to keep increasing substantially for most countries to an average of 72% in 2070. Even for people between 64 and 74 years of age, projections foresee an employment rate of up to 20% in 2070 (European Commission, 2020). This can indicate that in the future more grandparents will be participating in the workforce. Zamarro (2020) suggests that workers who are grandmothers, therefore familiar with the challenges of balancing work and care

responsibilities, are more willing to provide grandchild care, thus putting themselves often willingly in a sandwich position.

There is a clear gender aspect interwoven with the sandwich position: it is much more often women than men who take care of their ageing relatives, while women also more often take care of their own children and grandchildren. For these reasons, this book focusses especially on women between 45 and 65 years of age combining a full-time or part-time job or independent activity with a dual care task at home. This group is at high risk of burnout or withdrawal from the labour market. We provide international comparisons and offer tools for the WSG and their supervisors, educators and coaches for managing challenging situations in working life.

## 2. THE BOOK IS CREATED IN TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

The book is based on transnational cooperation between researchers from Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), Poland and Finland. The Time4Help project, under which a Polish–Finnish–Flemish partnership was established, has emphasised the issues of SG in these countries to a different extent. Thus, in Poland, the target group of the project was mature women, aged 45–65, whereas the research that was carried out concerned the situation of that group in the labour market. In Finland, the most important aspect was mature women’s entrepreneurship, which means that women are also the target group of the project in this country. However, in Flanders the keynote topic is the SG, and therefore the target group included both male and female participants.

The three countries indicated in the book and represented in the transnational Time4Help project differ greatly in many aspects, illustrating the varied circumstances of SG women across Europe, which makes the analyses carried out extremely interesting and valuable for both practitioners and researchers.

Several factors have been discussed in earlier research that affect inter-generational support within families. These range from ‘welfare state generosity’ or national and local policies and institutions to family structures, family policies and systems of social care provision, values and traditions concerning families and the education balance between generations and sexes (Albertini, 2016).

There are also several relevant variables differentiating Poland, Finland and Flanders, including: (1) financial and economic aspects, as Poland is a country from the former Eastern bloc characterised by a lower standard of living (measured e.g. by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita) and a



lower level of working conditions than Belgium and Finland, related to wellbeing at work, burnout, etc. (2) Political aspects, where, for example, welfare state regimes, and women's rights are quite different. Differences in welfare state regimes, Finland with a Scandinavian Social democratic model, Belgium with a Continental conservative model and Poland with the Central and Eastern European model (Ebbinghaus, 2012; Eikemo, Bambra, Joyce, & Dahl, 2008; Emigh, Feliciano, O'Malley, & Cook-Martín, 2018; Esping-Andersen, 1990), have an impact on, among other things, how wellbeing at work is understood in society – is it a private issue or a social issue (Ollier-Malaterre, 2017; Silverstein, Tur-Sinai, & Lewin-Epstein, 2020). (3) Cultural aspects, as the three countries differ significantly in terms of their cultural dimensions, for example, in their prevailing perceptions considering gender roles, individualism and religion (Gesteland, 1999; Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Schwartz, 2012). (4) Women's labour market participation, being 63.6% in Poland, 64.5% in Belgium and 76.6% in Finland in 2016 (OECD LSF Indicators by sex). Some more comparisons are presented in Table 1.

Since during the project implementation we noticed a great need for international comparative research on SG, we jointly developed a research formula for comparing people aged 45–65 in five European countries.

Due to our transnational multidisciplinary research cooperation and by combining quantitative and qualitative data, we can present extensive analyses of the situation of women and men in the labour market in countries that differ in terms of the solutions adopted, and from the individuals' perspective as well as the employers' and policy-makers' perspective. While designing and carrying out research, we use four types of triangulation: (1) data triangulation, combining current field research with previous studies, (2) investigator triangulation in multidisciplinary teams of researchers from different countries, (3) theory triangulation, using the interpretive and positivist paradigms in the analysis, and (4) methodological triangulation, namely using various methods of qualitative and quantitative data analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### 3. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is structured in four parts where Part A describes the theoretical and empirical work done in Flanders, Poland and Finland, Part B presents tools developed in the national projects and case studies from the projects, Part C introduces the international comparative study of the SG in five European

**Table 1. Some Comparisons of the Three Countries (BBC News, 2020; Deloitte, 2017; Eurostat, 2021).**

	Belgium	Finland	Poland
Population 2020	11.5 million	5.5 million	38.0 million
GDP per capita 2020	33,560 EUR	36,070 EUR	12,680 EUR
Life expectancy 2019	84.3 female; 79.8 male	84.8 female; 79.3 male	81.9 female; 74.1 male
Proportion of part-time employment and temporary contracts (men/women) 2020	9.9%/39.6%	9.1%/17.9%	3.2%/8.8%
Average hourly earnings for women lower than those for men 2019	5.8%	16.6%	8.5%
Adults (aged 16–74 years) used the Internet during the previous three months 2020	92%	97%	83%
Fertility rate per woman 2019	1.58	1.35	1.44
Maternal leave	3.75 months	4.4 months	5 months
Parental leave	4 months	6 months	8 months
Paternity leave	10 days	2.2 months	15 days

countries based on the transnational cooperation and Part D presents discussion, conclusions and recommendations for employers and policy-makers on how to support people of SG.

In the first part of the book, we present evidence-based material to support women in working life from three angles: (1) coping strategies to enable the combination of a dual care task with a job, (2) improvement of competences of working mature women and (3) lifelong learning as means to support women's sustainable careers. After this introduction, Miet Timmers and Veerle Lengeler in their chapter 'How Do They Manage? Coping Strategies of the Working Sandwich Generation in Flanders' study different coping mechanisms people use to deal with stress. Some of the strategies are more effective than others. Based on qualitative research in Flanders, this chapter presents a new taxonomy of nine coping strategies that WSG members use to cope with the demands of different life domains and different roles.

Next, the Polish researchers Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and Urszula Załuska discuss various themes based on their extensive research in their chapter '45+ Polish Women at Home and in the Labour Markets'. Firstly, based on their semiotic research, they discuss the mechanisms and symbolism

of mature femininity in Polish popular culture and public discourse. Secondly, they discuss the findings of their computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) research, indicating that in Poland, taking care of other people is an important barrier to the employment of mature women. The objects of interest of the CATI research were two groups: employers and mature women – the study was therefore, conducted on a nationwide representative sample of mature women ( $N=1,000$ ) and a sample of employers ( $N=100$ ). The results show that there are similarities and differences in the opinions of mature women and their employers.

The chapter ‘Sandwich Generation Women in Search for Meaningful Work and Life’ by the Finnish researchers Mervi Rajahonka and Kaija Villman discuss opportunities for lifelong learning as means of supporting SG women. They studied female managers and entrepreneurs and their views on lifelong learning. The particular focus is on how learning relates to these women’s careers, wellbeing at work and search for meaningful lives. In the chapter, a new model integrating women’s earning, learning and meaning aspects of work and life is developed. Each aspect of the model affects the other aspects, so that debating and balancing the aspects is the main issue of interest for women. The findings of the study show that for an individual, opportunities for lifelong learning and meaningful work assure personal development, wellbeing at work and a sustainable career. The empirical data were drawn from interviews with 67 women who participated in training and coaching programmes in the South Savo region, Finland, in 2017–2021.

In Part B of the book, we discuss the methods and tools which can be used to support SG women in working life, developed in real-life cases in the three countries. At the level of individuals, the challenge for SG women lies in finding and applying the right strategy combining various components of their lives. They need tools (coaching, training, etc.) that outline the different possibilities and show positive alternatives to the social withdrawal strategy. At the level of employers, managers and HR professionals, there are various challenges in relation to SG women. Firstly, they are invisible, as most employees who are informal carers do not report this to the HR department. Secondly, it is important that SG women’s jobs are flexible enough, allowing combination with caring tasks. Employers themselves will benefit from this: employers have every interest in motivating the older generation, the most experienced employees, to work for longer. At the level of career coaches, the challenge lies in the adequate guidance of women in the specific situation of the dual care task combined with a job.

The first chapter of Part B, ‘Family Supportive Supervisors Behaviour for the Sandwich Generation: Considerations for Training Practice’, by Miet Timmers

and Tim Gielens, presents tools developed in the ‘Sandwich Generation’ Project in Flanders, with which SG members and their supervisors learn how to manage challenging situations at home and in the workplace. The chapter contains a brief literature study on Family Supportive Supervisor Behaviour (FSSB), highlighting the importance of family-friendly corporate policies and FSSB for the WSG. The chapter ends with a look at a self-assessment and learning tool designed for supervisors and recommendations for a family supportive corporate culture.

The second chapter of Part B by Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and Urszula Załuska, ‘Tools Developed in and Lessons Learned from the Time4Help Project in Poland’, presents a description of model solutions developed in the Polish Project. The main attention is on the tools for the self-assessment of women in terms of their development needs and professional preferences.

Part B concludes with a chapter, ‘Cases and Lessons Learned from the Time4Help Project in Finland’, written by Kaija Villman and Mervi Rajahonka, describing cases and lessons learned from the Time4Help project in Finland. In the chapter, the authors describe a model for supporting mature women, developed as part of the Finnish Time4Help project. The model solution includes training mature women supporting their networking at work. The model is built on a novel training programme approach where first, women were asked to find a group of women who were interested in developing their enterprises or working skills and who had similar needs and interests to them, and after that, a training programme was built matching the needs of this particular group of women. Therefore, the authors build on the research literature on study circles, and study how women’s networks can be used in order to enhance the lifelong learning of mature women, support their working life and help them to reach an appropriate work–life balance. The empirical part of the research builds on interviews and observations with 25 women participating in Time4Help training programmes and their facilitators in Finland in 2019–2021.

Part C of the book presents international comparative research based on a computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) survey on representative samples of people aged 45–65 in five European countries. The chapter ‘Sandwich Generation in the Workplace – International Comparative Research’ by Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and Urszula Załuska discusses the assumptions and main conclusions from the research, the key purpose of which was to identify and characterise the representatives of the SG in selected European countries in relation to professional activity. The purpose was to gain data on people from the SG living in societies with diversified welfare state models, that is, Poland with its Central and Eastern European model, Finland with its social

democratic model, Belgium with its conservative model, Great Britain with its liberal model and Italy with its Southern European model. The research was carried out in the autumn of 2020 with representative samples of Internet users aged 45–65. The results confirm the more extensive care burden of women in these countries, but also differentiation between the countries covered by the study. The intensity of the SG phenomenon ranged from 25% in Italy and 16% in Poland to 8–9% in Belgium or Finland and about 6% in Great Britain. The 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.

In the concluding part of the book, we summarise the main results and draw conclusions on our research based on the viewpoints presented in the previous chapters. We present recommendations for employers, career coaches and policy-makers for supporting SG women in working life.

The book will be most interesting for people belonging to the SG and experts working in the field – practitioners, employers and policy-makers – and postgraduate students in family studies.

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PART A

THEORIES



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# Chapter 1

## HOW DO THEY MANAGE? COPING STRATEGIES OF THE WORKING SANDWICH GENERATION IN FLANDERS

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### ABSTRACT

*Drawing on in-depth interviews with 34 women and men of the working sandwich generation (WSG) in Flanders, this chapter presents a taxonomy of nine coping strategies that the WSG uses to balance intergenerational care with a job: an acceptance strategy, a boundary management strategy, a help-seeking strategy, a planning strategy, a governance strategy, a self-care strategy, a time focus strategy, a values strategy and a super-sandwich strategy. Individuals of the WSG do not use just one strategy, but combine different strategies simultaneously or consecutively. Moreover, different strategies are also strongly linked to each other so that there is a certain degree of ‘overlap’.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main challenges for the working sandwich generation (WSG) is the combination of a job with a double care task. There is evidence that the combination causes a lot of stress which has a negative effect on their well-being (Halinski, Duxbury, & Higgins, 2018; Solberg, Solberg, & Peterson, 2014) and can lead to burnout (Pines, Neal, Hammer, & Ickson, 2011). However, it is remarkable that the stress level, or the impact of stress on well-being, differs

among members of the WSG. This may be related to the intensity of the caring tasks or to the responsibilities or workload of the job, but it also depends on the way people deal with the stressors in their lives, which in turn influences the coping strategies they deploy.

Most of the literature on coping strategies rely on the basic theory of Lazarus and Folkman (Lazarus, 1993) who define coping as a process in which people make both cognitive and behavioural efforts to overcome, reduce or tolerate external and/or internal demands that are perceived as burdensome or beyond personal capabilities (Morganson, Culbertson, & Matthews, 2013). Resources play a central role in coping theories: if there are insufficient resources or if the resources are overburdened, stress arises. Stress in turn mobilises resources and thus initiates the coping process (Hobfoll, 2002). Quantitative and qualitative research with different populations, in different domains and focussing on different stressors, still contributes to the categorisation of the different coping strategies, although each taxonomy has limitations and designing a generally applicable classification of coping strategies does not seem to be immediately possible (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003).

It took some time for scholars looking at work–family interference to discover the importance of coping strategies (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005; Morganson et al., 2013; Rantanen, Mauno, Kinnunen, & Rantanen, 2011). Still, from the 1970s onwards, various taxonomies of coping strategies for the work–family stressor emerged (Clark, Michel, Early, & Baltes, 2014; Kalliath & Kalliath, 2014; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2007). More recently, attention has also been paid to the effects of coping strategies on the well-being of informal carers (Barbosa, Figueiredo, Sousa, & Demain, 2011; Calvano, 2013; Del-Pino-Casado, Pérez-Cruz, & Frías-Osuna, 2014; Hawken, Turner-Cobb, & Barnett, 2018; Spendelov, Adam, & Fairhurst, 2017). Specifically for the WSG, the literature is more scarce but it is expanding and includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Some studies describe coping strategies without developing a specific taxonomy (Remenick, 2001); other studies develop recommendations related to coping strategies (O’Sullivan, 2014; Riley & Bowen, 2005). Gillett and Crisp (2017) came to the conclusion that the use of problem- and emotion-focussed strategies both have positive effects on general well-being of the sandwich generation (SG). An avoidant coping style, on the other hand, has a positive effect on SG people with a lower stress level, but a negative effect in people with a high stress level.

Cullen, Hammer, Neal, and Sinclair (2009) and Neal and Hammer (2007) developed the first specific matrix with a taxonomy of six coping strategies for the WSG. Three coping strategies are centred on the increase of resources

and three on the diminishing of demands. In addition, they rely on the more classification of behaviour-based, emotion-based and cognitive-based coping styles. They also found a gender difference: women were much more likely to engage in coping styles that reduce social engagement and men in coping strategies that focus more on prioritisation.

Evans et al. (2016) developed a 12-part taxonomy which also adds more psychological elements such as personal motivation, values and beliefs which they group under the term ‘intra-role strategies’ in distinction to the inter-role strategies that correspond quite closely to Neal and Hammer’s taxonomy. Evans et al. (2017) distinguished four different target positions by which the WSG seeks to ensure physical and mental health: focus on help-seeking behaviour, focus on social connection, focus on personal health and focus on time management.

Although the different taxonomies provide interesting insights, sufficient qualitative data were lacking to obtain a clear view on the coping strategies for the WSG in Flanders. Since the purpose of this practice-based research was to develop practical instruments to strengthen the coping strategies of the WSG, a more applied taxonomy with clear examples was needed.

## 2. DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was designed in which 34 people from the WSG were interviewed face-to-face. Through purposeful sampling with the use of social media platforms, contact details of 68 persons of the WSG in Flanders were collected. During a short telephone interview, data were collected on demographic details and work and care responsibilities. Based on this, a selection of respondents was made, striving for the maximum possible variation in terms of gender, family composition, extent of care tasks, age and place of residence.

The interviews were conducted in the home of the WSG between January and April 2019, using a semi-structured topic guide. Interviews were recorded on an audio device and participants signed an informed consent form. After 34 in-depth interviews, an initial qualitative analysis concluded that there was sufficient saturation in the data and it was decided not to conduct further interviews. A profile analysis of the respondents was made on the basis of these 34 participants (Fig. 1). The verbatim transcribed interviews were analysed using a consecutively open, axial and selective coding (Mortelmans, 2013). Open coding with use of NVIVO software was used to identify categories of data, resulting in approximately 250 open coding categories. An axial coding followed the open coding to develop a model of different strategies the respondents were using to make the combination of care and job

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Profile of the resident children</b>		
Women	84%	No resident children	38%
Men	16%	All children < 12	3%
<b>Age</b>		Children 0–18	6%
45–49	24%	0-18 with at least 1 child with disability	3%
50–54	21%	Children 12–18	18%
55–59	29%	Children > 18	21%
60–64	24%	> 18 with at least 1 child with disability	12%
Not specified	2%	<b>Grandparents</b>	47%
<b>Family composition</b>		<b>Care for grandchildren</b>	
Living with partner	76%	<5 hours/week	19%
Living without partner	18%	>5 hours/week	63%
Not specified	6%	Not specified	19%
<b>Work regime</b>		<b>Care for the older generation</b>	
Full-time	29%	Daily	21%
Part time > 50%	44%	Few times a week	41%
Part time 50% or less	21%	Once a week	9%
Not specified	6%	Few time a month	12%
<b>Profession</b>		Not specified	18%
Administrative employee	41%	<b>Living situation of the older generation</b>	
Civil servant	15%	Living independently with partner	24%
Teacher	12%	Living independently alone	47%
Health or social worker	9%	Living with the WSG	15%
Self-employed	2%	Living in retirement home	6%
other	6%		

Source: Authors' original work.

**Fig. 1. Profile Analysis of the Respondents.**

workable. Using a constant comparative process, the researcher not only re-examined the interview transcriptions to help further refine the model of nine coping strategies, but also used further literature to be able to describe some coping strategies in a more profound manner. In this way, the methodological approach can be differentiated whereby in the first phase of coding and classification a completely inductive way of working was used and in the description of the strategies a rather abductive approach was taken (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

### 3. NINE COPING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY THE WSG

#### 3.1. Acceptance Strategy

A significant way in which people from the SG deal with the demands made of them is to accept the situation as it is. Usually this involves accepting the care situation, the changing relationship with the person in need of help and the acknowledgement that unexpected things just often happen in life. This strategy also has an introspective side: the WSG accepts that they place high demands on themselves and others.

*I would like to have time for many more things: for my parents, for my son, for my friends. But I can't, I'm sandwiched. If I could buy time, but that is not possible. So I'll just have to learn to deal with that. I just have to keep going on, not reflecting too much, just put my mind at rest once in a while.*

Applied to the work domain, the WSG accepts organisational changes and accepts that their own career expectations need to be adjusted. In this strategy, cognition and emotion work strongly together. This strategy aims to reduce contextual demands and to strengthen personal resources, such as the ability to put things into perspective or cognitive flexibility.

#### 3.2. Boundary Management Strategy

In the boundary management strategy, the WSG mainly uses cognitive skills to deal with the critical boundaries, both psychologically and behaviourally between work, family, caring for the younger generation, caring for the older generation and one's own needs. The SG includes both 'segmenters', people who prefer clear boundaries between the different domains of life, and 'integrators', people who mainly see advantages in dealing flexibly with boundaries (Bulger, Matthews, & Hoffman, 2007). In research among the WSG, there are more individuals at the 'segmenter' end of the continuum, although respondents indicate that they sometimes move flexibly across the continuum, but mostly becoming more of a 'segmenter'.

*So if I am at home, I will take care of home and family. If I am at work, I will be committed to my work. But I can't combine the two, because then I don't do either one of them well.*

Some of the WSG continue to apply very permeable boundaries and see – especially in the flexible handling of the boundaries between work and family – a way to achieve a good combination of work, family and care. An important skill

that both segmenters and integrators of the WSG indicate for applying this strategy is to be able to say 'no' to questions from both the family and the work environment and in doing so keep one's own sense of guilt within limits.

### 3.3. Help-seeking Strategy

The WSG often apply a behavioural help-seeking strategy for one or more life domains: their care tasks, the household and their duties at work. For some, the help-seeking strategy is an obvious way of combining a double care task with a job. The help-seeking strategy feels very natural to this group. Others feel they have to cross a threshold to ask for help, for them this strategy is more difficult to handle and they describe it as a courageous attitude.

*When my mother was admitted to the retirement home, I was at peace. I know there is always someone there, she's never alone. If something is wrong, they can call me, day or night. Then I calmed down, then it went better.*

The WSG most often refers to the use of professional help for the care of the older generation for personal hygiene, housekeeping, cleaning and nursing. If the professional help is well organised and a relation of trust can be developed with the professional service providers, this is an important way of reducing their own concerns and stress, which is experienced as very helpful. The WSG also appeal to their family and social network in the help-seeking strategy. The life partner is often the first to be called upon, but siblings and adolescent or adult children are also involved. In the case of siblings, there is often a division of labour or a rotation of roles. Friends, own children or other family members are more likely to be called in at times of crisis. The social network of family members and friends can also provide mental support for the SG. Especially people in a similar situation can be a source of recognition and support.

### 3.4. Planning Strategy

Many respondents of the WSG have a very explicit and active planning strategy to keep their daily and weekly tasks on track. The planning can consist of written or mental lists of what needs to be done, coupled with a clear division of tasks with other family members or professional actors. The WSG plans the various tasks for which they are responsible: the care of their own children or grandchildren, housekeeping, their job, their own hobbies and the care of the older generation.

*Then I thought I'll never keep this up, I really have to start thinking day by day and I even need to divide my day into time slots. I say to*

*myself: Now you are doing this for two hours and then you're going to do that. So a bit autistic-like but it helps. It makes my head a little more at ease and I can see everything in a clearer perspective.*

In structuring and planning tasks, respondents seek a balance between routine and flexibility. Some rely mainly on routine, building in predictability into daily and weekly plans, for others it is important to be able to respond flexibly to unexpected circumstances.

Planning is not limited to practical matters only. It also involves the planning of activities and time to strengthen one's own well-being through social contacts and leisure activities. Some respondents also linked the planning strategy to a form of mindfulness, although not explicitly. Planning has to do with mental structure, being able to focus on what one is doing at that moment. A respondent even planned 'time to think' in order to achieve mental peace.

### 3.5. Personal Governance Strategy or Priority Strategy

The personal governance strategy is closely related to the boundary management strategy and is also primarily a cognitive strategy. It proceeds in two phases: in the first phase, a person determines what he considers to be a priority at that moment in life and what he will and will not commit to. In the second phase, a person takes control and ensures that the priority which is set can actually be implemented. Both short-term and long-term priorities are applied according to two selection strategies: a person can give priority to what he considers to be important or to what he actually likes and enjoys.

The personal governance strategy can focus on the WSG's own life but also on the lives of others. Taking charge of one's own life means communicating and acting upon one's own needs and requirements. The personal governance strategy may also involve taking charge of the life of another, often the older generation. Based on a clear prioritisation, the WSG will, for example, determine what kind of care tasks are provided by themselves and which are not. The governance strategy implies that a person can listen to the expectations of another, but can also clearly indicate why they do not follow them.

*One afternoon my mother was angry and shouted 'I don't want to stay here anymore, take me to a retirement home'. She thought I was going to say 'come and live with me'. I immediately headed for the retirement home and arranged for temporary accommodation for three months. This hit my mother very hard. But I persisted and now she is in this facility permanently.*

This strategy is also often applied by the WSG in a professional context, where information is sought about flexibility options and possibilities for



reducing one's working hours. Respondents indicate that they make their wishes clear to their employer and try to take control of their work tasks and responsibilities as much as possible.

### 3.6. Self-care Strategy

Most respondents from the WSG apply a self-care strategy. They indicate that they need to devote enough time to their own needs and requirements to be able to take care of others. The self-care strategy is closely linked to the personal governance strategy and the boundary management strategy. After all, self-care entails daring to set aside time to rest mentally and/or physically and, at that moment, putting oneself first. The WSG especially points out the importance of relaxation, me-time, social contact, interaction with animals and professional psychological help as an interpretation of the self-care strategy. Since many examples were given of how self-care can be implemented, it is interesting to present this in a word cloud (Fig. 2).



Source: Authors' original work.

**Fig. 2. Word Cloud Self-care Strategy.**

### 3.7. Time Focus Strategy

Many WSG people use a time focus strategy which can be directed either to the present or to the future. With a time focus on the present, the WSG looks at what needs to be done each day and draws satisfaction from the daily tasks. People focus on the here and now.

*I take each day as it comes. I don't look into the future, and I don't look into the past. I leave problems behind me easily, they don't stay with me for months or years.*

When focussing on the future, the hope is consistently present that the situation will improve and that, for example, there will be more balance in work and family responsibilities or that there will be more 'me-time'. A key factor here is the perspective that retirement age is in reach. A second future perspective that is mentioned with some trepidation is the estimation of the finiteness of care for the elderly. The passing away or a move to a retirement home will end the care or make it less of a burden.

*You know it's temporary because my mother is 86. Caring for her is not for the rest of my life. Then it would be very heavy. But now it's just a period we have to go through, it's part of life. Looking back, I will be glad that I was able to do it for her.*

### 3.8. Value Strategy

All respondents of the WSG use a value strategy in one way or another. Acting in accordance with one's own values and standards is a motivator to take up responsibilities and care for different generations and for their job. A first driver that the WSG uses is a normative idea of what good conduct is: the WSG indicates that they are acting in accordance with their own upbringing or prevailing norms.

*Caring for another is simply what I expect in life. I was also brought up that way. It's not because you leave your parental home that you start thinking only of yourself and your own cocoon.*

A second driver is based on exchange theory and reciprocity. Caring for the older generation is seen as returning care that one has received in the past. Care for one's own children or grandchildren is sometimes seen a sort of investment in order to receive attention and care return in the future. In this way, the SG sees itself as a pivot in an intergenerational care network.

*I think I owe this to my mother. She has always taken good care of me and I have had a very good home. This is the only thing I can do. She doesn't know it anymore, but she is quiet. I hope she may die in her seat.*

A third driver of the value strategy is love, solidarity and altruism. People from the WSG testify that they do their best for the sake of connectedness with others, without wanting anything in return, except possibly love and connectedness itself. This motivation is altruistic to a substantial degree, or with a WSG-citation 'It is more enjoyable to give than to receive'. A fourth driver, although not mentioned regularly is spirituality or religion.

### 3.9. Super-sandwich Strategy

The 'super sandwich' tries to keep all the balls in the air at the same time. Often, a super-sandwich strategy is a temporary option: there is a crisis situation or a sudden change and the only choice is to throw everything into the breach. The super-sandwich strategy fades away as soon as the situation has normalised or space has been found to use other strategies. Many respondents indicated that they used this strategy at a certain point, that they felt there was no alternative. They were being called upon so strongly that they had no mental space to consider alternatives.

*I felt at that moment that there was no other way. I really don't know if I would do it again. But it was very hard.*

But sometimes the 'super-sandwich strategy' lasts a long time. People judge themselves strong and continue to consider this strategy feasible for a long time. Several respondents testify that using this strategy for a long time has an impact on their health: they get burned out or end up with depression.

## 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The WSG uses different strategies to keep the combination of a double care task with a job feasible. From the qualitative research, nine strategies were identified whereby there is certainly overlap and similarities. All respondents use different strategies, but usually one or a few strategies are more dominant. This new taxonomy of coping strategies for the WSG corresponds in several respects to previously developed classifications by [Neal and Hammer \(2007\)](#) and [Evans et al. \(2016\)](#), although the designation does not coincide. Only the boundary-management strategy, especially for integrators, is more strongly identified in this taxonomy as a separate strategy in this taxonomy. The super-sandwich strategy

is also a newly observed strategy, probably because it offers little sustainable perspective and therefore is not seen as a strategy in previous research.

From this new taxonomy, a self-assessment questionnaire was developed that the WSG can use to discover which coping strategies they already use often and which can be developed to a greater extent (Timmers, 2021). This self-assessment questionnaire was used at the start of a specific coaching processes and is used in training sessions for the WSG (Lengeler, 2021). The taxonomy of nine coping strategies should therefore be regarded primarily as an instrument for (self)orientation of the SG and a starting point for discussion and guidance in which the strategies that are deployed to a high degree are zoomed in on in order to analyse on the basis of which forces they arise and to what results they lead. The strategies that are used to a limited extent or even withheld should also be discussed. Here, it is possible to look at what is needed to strengthen some of the under-used strategies.

This taxonomy and self-assessment tool also provides opportunities for further research. For instance, research could be conducted to determine which strategies have more influence on the well-being of the WSG and on the effective management of the combination of a double care task with a job. Cross-national differences in both coping strategies and their effects could also be explored.

## 5. SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

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### Self-assessment Questionnaire

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After each statement, enter a number from 0 to 4 (you may not enter the number 2).

0: Do not agree at all

1: Agree a little

3: Mostly agree

4: Fully agree

---

1 I engage professional help to care for the older generation. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_

2 I can accept that the situation in my family is as it is at the moment. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_

3 I make a weekly or daily written schedule of what needs to be done. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_

4 There is a clear division of tasks for the care of the older generation, I know very well who will do what. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_

5 I can draw clear boundaries between work and family. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_

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6	I feel like I have to combine too many things.	Your Score: _____
7	I find it helpful that the boundaries between work and family are not so clear.	Your Score: _____
8	I consciously build in 'me-time'.	Your Score: _____
9	I think that in the future I will have more time and space for myself.	Your Score: _____
10	I often think that time will bring advice and then hope that my situation will be easier in the future.	Your Score: _____
11	I take care of relatives because I think that is how it should be: you have to take care of another person.	Your Score: _____
12	I dare to make decisions that will change other people's lives greatly, even if they don't agree with it at first.	Your Score: _____
13	I focus on the here and now.	Your Score: _____
14	I give priority to what I find important in life.	Your Score: _____
15	I give priority to what I like to do.	Your Score: _____
16	I make as much use as possible of flexible measures at work in order to make it possible to combine family and work.	Your Score: _____
17	I am confident that professional care workers and services are doing a good job.	Your Score: _____
18	I can accept that the situation at work is what it is and I don't feel the need to change much.	Your Score: _____
19	I dedicate myself to my family mainly out of love and solidarity.	Your Score: _____
20	I find it easy to locate services that offer professional help.	Your Score: _____
21	I can accept that things are a bit difficult at the moment and that things are not going as smoothly as usual.	Your Score: _____
22	I can combine my family, work and the care of relatives perfectly well and do not need any help.	Your Score: _____
23	I can clearly say 'no' if people ask extra things of me at work.	Your Score: _____
24	I can clearly explain my own needs.	Your Score: _____
25	I make sure that I can relax.	Your Score: _____

- 
- 26 I don't mind catching up on hours of work in the evening or at the weekend. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 27 I can easily say 'no' if my family members ask me to do things I don't have time for. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 28 I can put things into perspective. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 29 I make choices of my own free will and not because I feel forced to. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 30 I schedule time for what I like to do. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 31 I am good at multitasking: while working, I am also busy with my family, and when caring for my family, I am often still busy with work. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 32 I feel overstressed. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 33 I hire professional help for my own housekeeping. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
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- 34 I manage to keep to the schedule I make to a large extent. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 35 I manage to find a good balance between routine and flexibility. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
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- 36 I work a lot or I commit myself intensively to my job and I think I have a high work ethic. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 37 I try to be satisfied with the things I do every day. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 38 I find energy to care for the older generation in the knowledge that it will not last very long. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 39 The care I give is better than the care given by professionals. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 40 I receive psychological help from a therapist, psychologist, ... or consider doing so. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 41 I never feel guilty if I say 'no' when people call on me. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 42 I feel isolated. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 43 I want to show my children that it is important to take care of people, so maybe they will take care of me later. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 44 I seek contact with people to unwind. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 45 I take care of my family because they also take care of me or have taken care of me. Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_

**Result Calculation**

For each question (from 1 to 45), fill in the number on the coloured field. Sometimes you fill in the same number twice in one row. Then add up the final score per column.

	1	2A	2B	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
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	1	2A	2B	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
36										
37										
38										
39										
40										
41										
42										
43										
44										
45										
<b>Total score</b>										

Enter the total score of each column in the indicated strategy (same number). See which strategies you score high and low on.

Column	Name of the Strategy	Your Total Score
1	Acceptance strategy	
2A	Boundary management strategy: segmenter	
2B	Boundary management strategy: integrator	
3	Help-seeking strategy	
4	Planning strategy	
5	Personal governance strategy	
6	Self-care strategy	
7	Time focus strategy	
8	Values strategy	
9	Super-sandwich strategy	

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## Chapter 2

### 45+ POLISH WOMEN AT HOME AND IN THE LABOUR MARKETS

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#### ABSTRACT

*The chapter discusses the assumptions and main conclusions from the research conducted within the framework of the Polish part of the Time4Help project. The aim of the research was to evaluate the situation of mature Polish women in the context of challenges in the labour market. The main source of data for the analysis was the qualitative (semiotic) and quantitative research (CATI – computer assisted telephone interview). As part of the semiotic research, the authors analysed texts from broadly understood culture and mainly from 2016 to 2018. The CATI research was carried out in 2019 with the use of proprietary questionnaires on representative samples of women aged 45–65 and employers.*

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the Polish part of the *Time4Help*<sup>1</sup> project was to develop, test and implement new solutions to support mature women. We have defined the target group of the project, that is, mature women, as women aged 45–65, regardless of their current professional activity. Determining the lower limit of the assumed age range was preceded by desk research, the aim of which was to fit into the characteristics (the most common in the literature on the subject) of middle-aged adults involved in taking care of dependent people (Evans

et al., 2016; Friedman, Sung, & Wiemers, 2017; Silverstein, Tur-Sinai, & Lewin-Epstein, 2020; Wiemers & Bianchi, 2015). The upper age limit – pre-retirement – was in a way imposed on us due to certain constraints of support from projects financed by the European Social Fund in Poland. According to the applicable law, in Poland 65 is the official retirement age, whereas women can retire at the age of 60.

As for limiting the target group only to women, while developing the concept of the project we thought that the group defined as mature women is the group particularly in need of effective support, and the need for this support will increase in the future. Mature women constitute the majority of the so-called sandwich generation, and they need support in every country. As for Europe, such a need is visible especially in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, where the notion of sandwich generation is still little known and rather not taken into account when developing systemic solutions. We assumed unequal treatment of women in the labour market as a key factor determining the situation of mature women. In all European countries, the employment rate for women is lower than that for men, while in countries such as Poland the difference amounts to over a dozen percentage points (Eurostat, 2020, 2021). Female employees earn less in general (statistically), and also less than men even if they have the same positions. It is due to the fact that they work much more often in the so-called helping professions that are usually lower paid. Women also less frequently take managerial positions. As potential employees, they are not that attractive because they are stereotypically perceived as less able to cope with modern technologies and less available due to the heavier burden of household duties. Finally, in many countries including Poland, women retire faster and, with statistically lower income and shorter professional activity, they are unable to earn a pension that will secure a decent life for them when they stop working. Higher average life expectancy, frequent lack of opportunities for self-development due to involvement in looking after dependent people and low income constitute a serious risk of poverty and loneliness in old age. Health problems resulting from, for example, long-term care for those who are dependent can be an additional problem.

In the project, we wanted to analyse the situation of Polish mature women and, using the results of the research, suggest solutions that may effectively increase the chances of improving their situation in the labour market. In order to bridge the gap in statistical data, at the stage of in-depth diagnosis of needs in the project, we planned primary research on representative samples dedicated to the broadly understood issues of mature women in Poland. From the point of view of the project's objectives, it was crucial to answer two research questions:

- (1) What is the perception of mature women in Polish society in the group of employers and the feelings of women aged 45–65 in this respect?
- (2) Are there any differences in the perception of the attractiveness of mature women as a group of potential employees according to employers and mature women themselves?

In this chapter, we will strive to answer these two research questions.

## 2. DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH AND APPLIED RESEARCH METHODS

The main source of data for the analysis was two types of research – qualitative (semiotic) and quantitative research (CATI – computer assisted telephone interview). The qualitative research was carried out with the use of semiotics and tools developed on its basis. It is worth emphasising that the semiotic research does not ask questions directly to respondents but covers existing texts from broadly understood culture. The semiotic research allowed us to identify the threads and themes of female maturity in popular culture, as well as the barriers present in this area in public discourse. The research on the so-called popular culture texts concerned the perception of mature femininity in general and in the context of work. Its aim was to understand the mechanisms, symbolism and codes of mature femininity present in popular culture and in public discourse. The survey was carried out in the first quarter of 2019 by a company specialising in this type of activity.<sup>2</sup> The texts used for the analysis came mainly from Poland from the years 2016 to 2018. Texts from other countries and materials from earlier periods were also taken into consideration. In total, over 500 press texts and about 1,000 videos, advertisements, book guides and Internet portals were analysed. The results of the semiotic research were to be used primarily to increase the effectiveness of communication with the distinguished target group.

The main objective of the CATI research was to assess the situation of mature women in Poland, their involvement in family and professional life, in activities related to improving their skills and competences, as well as to evaluate their state of being, economic situation and values important in life. The research was carried out in July 2019 with the use of proprietary questionnaires by a specialised company dealing with public opinion research.<sup>3</sup> Interviews lasted, on average, 20 minutes. The study was addressed to two groups – women aged 45–65 declaring their permanent place of residence in Poland and employers. Both groups included people and entities from all over the country. They were informed about its confidential nature and the

fact that its results will be presented only in the form of aggregate statistics. The size of the female sample included 1,010 people. It was representative in terms of the following characteristics: age groups, education level, the region of residence and size of the place of residence. The quotas for each category were proportional to the distribution of a given characteristic in the population. In the group of employers, 104 interviews were carried out. An employer was understood as an organisation employing (apart from the owner) at least four people, which was represented by a decision-maker in the field of hiring employees in a given organisation, for example, an owner, a managing director or the head of the HR department, who declared having at least 50% impact on decisions concerning employment. The sample was stratified due to the size of the organisation, the place where it had its office including the size of the town/city. The size of the strata was proportional to the distribution of characteristics in the population of companies. Additionally, the sample was controlled due to the fact of employing or not employing mature women – 50% for each category. In the case of meeting the quotas in a way slightly different from the assumptions, we applied post-stratification weighting. The characteristics of the research samples in terms of the indicated features are presented in [Table 1](#). As for the sample of female respondents, three age groups were distinguished: 45–55 years (women who have at least five years of work to go before reaching the full retirement age), 56–60 years (women who are at pre-retirement age and have related employee privileges) and 61–65 years (women at the retirement age). The level of education has been divided into three categories: primary or lower, secondary or post-secondary and tertiary or academic degree. The place of residence was considered at the NUTS 1 level, that is, macro-regions. In Poland, a division into seven macro-regions has been in force since 2018, whereas this year the Mazowieckie Voivodeship was separated as an individual macro-region. A similar solution was adopted in the second part of the study concerning employers. The size of the place of residence for both CATI research samples was determined on a seven-point scale – [Table 1](#) shows the results cumulated into four categories. In the case of the sample of employers, the size of the organisation was determined on a five-point scale. [Table 1](#) shows the division into three categories: micro-companies, small companies and medium and large companies.

In addition to the characteristics presented in [Table 1](#), it is worth paying attention to other respondents' features which did not concern the officially required quotas. About 45% of mature women evaluated their financial situation as average, which means that they can afford to satisfy their needs on a daily basis, but additional expenses might be a problem. A similar percentage of respondents can only afford to satisfy their basic needs or do not

**Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample of Mature Women and the Sample of Employers.**

Characteristic	Characteristic Categories/Percentage			
<i>Mature women</i>				
Age group	45–55 years old	56–60 years old	61–65 years old	
	47.0	27.5	25.5	
Education level	Primary or lower	Secondary, post-secondary	Tertiary, academic degree	
	49.0	44.4	6.6	
Region of residence	South	Northwest	Southwest	North
	17.9	17.2	12.1	14.3
	Central	Eastern	Masovian Voivodeship	
	10.7	13.8	14.0	
Place of residence	Village	City under 50 thous. residents	City under 200 thous. residents	City over 200 thous. residents
	35.6	26.7	19.3	19.4
<i>Employers</i>				
Firm size	5–9 employees	10–49 employees	50 employees and more	
	61.5	17.4	21.1	
Region of activity	South	Northwest	Southwest	North
	20.8	17.8	10.2	13.8
	Central	Eastern	Masovian Voivodeship	
	8.6	10.1	18.7	
Place of activity	Village	City under 50 thous. residents	City under 200 thous. residents	City over 200 thous. residents
	26.1	24.8	17.7	31.4

Source: Own elaboration.

possess sufficient financial resources to do this. Only 9% indicated that they can afford everything they need. The most frequently used source of information is television and the Internet, followed by friends, family and neighbours. Over 50% of the respondents take part in religious practices at least once a week. In the group of employers, 63% were women. Overall, 36% were the main decision-maker in terms of hiring employees, whereas the remaining 64% make decisions in this regard together with others. In terms of the position held, the respondents were mainly owners/co-owners (33%), people dealing with HR matters (31%), directors (16%) or senior managers (14%). According to the research assumptions, 50% of organisations were those employing mature women. Among them, the highest percentage was



constituted by companies/institutions in which the percentage of mature women in the staff was up to 25%, whereas the lowest – those where the percentage was more than 75%.

In order to analyse the data from the semiotic research, we relied on the semiotic square created by the Lithuanian semiotician, A. J. Greimas (1969). According to this model, meaning and value in a specific culture are generated by a place in the structure formed by binary oppositions (e.g. good–bad) and the relations of contradictions complementing them (e.g. not-bad–not-good).<sup>4</sup> As for data from the CATI research, we mainly analysed the number and frequency of selection of individual categories of answers in questions as well as descriptive statistics. Additionally, in order to assess the relationship between demographic and occupational characteristics and life situation, and values important in the life of mature women in Poland, a classification was performed using the two step cluster analysis method. This method allowed us to take into account both quantitative and qualitative variables in the research. Its selection was determined by the measurement of most of the characteristics included in the research questionnaire on a nominal or ordinal scale. The procedure applied within the software used (SPSS 26.0) made it possible to automatically select the optimal number of clusters by comparing the value of the model selection criterion for different grouping solutions. As a measure of distance, we adopted the likelihood ratio, whereas in the procedure of automatic determination of the number of clusters we used the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). One of the possible results of the classification was the formation of an output variable indicating that each participant belonged to a specific cluster (The SPSS, 2001). This made it possible to analyse the overrepresentation/underrepresentation of respondents with the selected categories of characteristics in individual clusters. Overrepresentation is understood as greater percentage share of representatives of a given subgroup in the cluster than the percentage share for the entire sample, whereas underrepresentation is the opposite situation, that is, a lower percentage share of representatives of a given subgroup in the cluster than the percentage share for the entire sample (basing on: Skiba et al., 2008).

### 3. PERCEPTION OF MATURE WOMEN ACCORDING TO SEMIOTIC RESEARCH

As part of the research of mature femininity, signs<sup>5</sup> available in texts from popular culture, advertising, press, television, films, literature and music were analysed. Thanks to this research, it was possible to identify the threads and

topics of mature women in popular culture. We particularly strove to identify barriers to this target group existing in public discourse because, as mentioned earlier, the main objective of the research was to increase the effectiveness of communication in the area of employing mature women. The main topic of the research was the professional activity of mature women and the so-called codes functioning in popular culture, that is, the methods of presenting mature femininity the most adequate for Polish society. According to cultural experts, codes are a form of a cultural shortcut and constitute typical visual, verbal, sound or mixed forms of discourse expression at a specific point in time (Alexander, 2000; Polak & Żurawicka-Koczan, 2011).

On the basis of the semiotic research, the main cultural barriers that hamper the employment of mature women have been identified in public discourse (Report on semiotic research carried out as part of the *Time4Help* project, 2019). From the perspective of women and employers themselves, they can be characterised as follows:

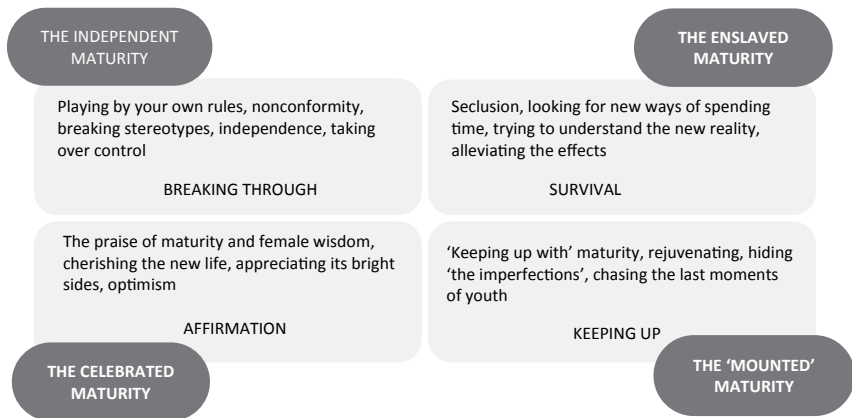
- *Family limitations* – in public discourse in Poland mature women are often depicted as people involved in numerous household and family duties, which undoubtedly discourages them from fighting for their own rights in the labour market. As confirmed by the CATI research, family responsibilities and duties are crucial for mature women, whereas issues connected with professional life become of secondary importance. On the other hand, the employers are not interested in employing a mature woman because they fear that she might abandon her job for the sake of family or roles she has to fulfil, for example, a grandmother or carer. It seems that this barrier, along with the perceived image of a mature woman as the guardian of hearth and home, is the main reason for not taking up any professional activity or taking it up in a very limited scope.
- *The cult of youth and change* – this type of discourse deprives mature women of their professional strengths and depreciates their skills as well as abilities. Stereotypically, a mature woman is perceived as a person reluctant to change and an employee who finds it difficult to keep up with modern technologies and adapt to them. The employer prefers someone younger who can keep up with the times and who will be open to changes and novelties. Loyalty and experience, which are attributes of mature women, are perceived rather pejoratively as a sign of stability or even stagnation.
- *Fear, shame and humiliation* – it is believed that mature women tend to stick to the same workplace for several years, without the possibility or willingness to change or take on new challenges. Such an attitude also

discourages them from, for example, setting up their own business. As a result, employers gain advantage over female employees, as in the case of employees with disabilities. They may also exploit them and see no need to invest in their development.

- *Stagnation in a full-time job* – there is a conviction among mature women that working full-time is ‘safe’ for them. The moment of losing one’s full-time job evokes great fear that makes it impossible for the person to look for something new or adapt to the current requirements of the labour market. From the employer’s point of view, mature women are a burden for the company, especially that there are less costly and more flexible forms of employment that employers can use.
- *Looking forward to retirement* – another conviction says that mature women are less valuable for a company than their younger colleagues. According to employers, mature employees (regardless of gender) constitute a burden and a limitation for the company, especially in the context of adapting to changing market conditions.
- *Unwanted potential* – demographic changes and the ageing of Polish society create an opportunity for mature women to enter the labour market. However, employers should send a clear message saying that this group is a source of potentially good employees with high potential. It should be noted that employers are still not prepared to consciously employ mature women. They treat them as a ‘demographic compulsion’ and are not convinced of the importance of features such as experience or loyalty.

The analysis of the texts of culture collected during the semiotic research made it possible to distinguish four main ways of perceiving mature femininity, schematically presented in the form of a semiotic square in Fig. 1. Their characteristics are as follows:

- *Independent maturity* – depicting the mature woman as a strong individual, not succumbing to peer pressure or stereotypes. She establishes conditions on her own, going beyond applicable schemes and models. The mature woman does not undergo any dictates of ‘young and beautiful’ but stays independent.
- *Enslaved maturity* – lack of willingness to experience anything new. The mature woman keeps thinking about the past and just tries to survive. She holds on to the role assigned to her – the role of a caretaker,



Source: Report on semiotic research carried out as part of the *Time4Help* project (2019).

**Fig. 1. Semiotic Square of Perception of Mature Women in Popular Culture.**

a grandmother and the guardian of hearth and home. She endures comments and stereotypical opinions about her. When at work, she looks forward to her retirement.

- *Celebrated maturity* – radiating joy. The mature woman treats her maturity as the beginning of something new, time for herself she can spend however she wants. She follows her passions which were often put off for years, accepts herself as she is, and enjoys the life. She is convinced that she can achieve a lot more professionally, financially and emotionally.
- *'Mounted' maturity* – desire to keep up with changes. The mature woman tries to meet expectations, she is active and looks for practical tips. She is convinced that one cannot succumb to old age and has to fight for themselves. She can take care of herself and work on her physical and mental condition. According to this idea, mature femininity requires effort – therefore she constantly looks for practical hints.

The main opposition is 'independent maturity', that is, the strong and independent woman versus 'enslaved maturity' presenting the woman who succumbs to the current stereotypes. The contradiction of the former is 'mounted maturity' indicating the need to keep up with the upcoming changes, whereas the contradiction of the latter is 'celebrated maturity', which treats this stage of life as a time to pursue one's own passions and interests. 'Mounted maturity' and 'celebrated maturity' create the second semantic system based on opposition.

#### 4. SITUATION OF MATURE WOMEN IN POLAND ACCORDING TO CATI RESEARCH

The CATI research on the representative sample of women aged 45–65 concerned mainly the following aspects: assessment of their life situation including the context of their own development, assessment of the professional situation and their values. Due to the fact that in the questionnaire used in the research conducted among employers at the same time we also asked about the assessment of the professional situation of mature women, it was possible to confront the opinions of both groups.

##### 4.1. Life Situation and Taking Care of Personal Development

According to the results of the CATI research, the majority of women (70%) aged 45–65 living in Poland are in stable relationships. In the household where they live, there are on average three people, but most often two (37% of the respondents' answers). Mature women very often take care of different people (49% of the respondents). In most cases, they look after children or parents (35% of answers for each option), grandchildren (29% of answers), but less often partners/husbands (19%) or other people (e.g. relatives, siblings, grandparents, unrelated persons – less than 5% of the answers for each option). It is worth emphasising that this care is very intense – an average amount of time devoted to this activity is 35 hours a week (in the group of women who provide this care), which is equivalent to working full-time. Importantly, more than one-third of mature women (38%) look after people with disabilities who belong to one of the above-mentioned groups of dependent people. About 18.6% of the respondents belong to the sandwich generation (i.e. they take care of the older and younger generation at the same time), whereas 8.6% to the group of working sandwich generation.

The first group of questions concerned the self-assessment of independence, primarily in the use of broadly understood modern technologies and mobility. Mature women, especially those from the younger group (45–55 years old), feel very comfortable with what the online world offers, especially when it comes to basic functions and activities. They can use the Internet, smartphones and computers, as well as social media and instant messaging – 49% of the respondents stated they are fully independent in this regard. Online banking, shopping or reservations are not a problem for 37% of the respondents. However, the situation looks different when it comes to driving a car – only 35% of the respondents indicated full independence in this

respect, and another 6% indicated little need for help. The assessment of one's health appeared to be positive. Mature women assess their mood and general sensation on a daily basis as good (77% of all respondents), whereas 83% of the respondents who are professionally active – as good or very good. As for physical fitness and current state of health, 69% of all respondents perceive it as good or very good. As before, a higher percentage was observed in the group of working women – 77% for physical fitness and 78% for the current state of health, respectively. Better assessments of all aspects of health in the case of professionally active women are probably due to the fact that women who feel better work much more often, although it is possible that better mood and general sensation may be the result of professional activity. Another interesting finding concerned low activity of mature women in their free time. Only about 12% of the respondents stated that they belong to associations, foundations or housing communities, 8% indicated they are active on blogs or Facebook and another 8% stated they were involved in sports and tourism. About 7% of the respondents claimed they belong to religious organisations or movements. As many as 67% indicated lack of any activity in an organised form in their free time.

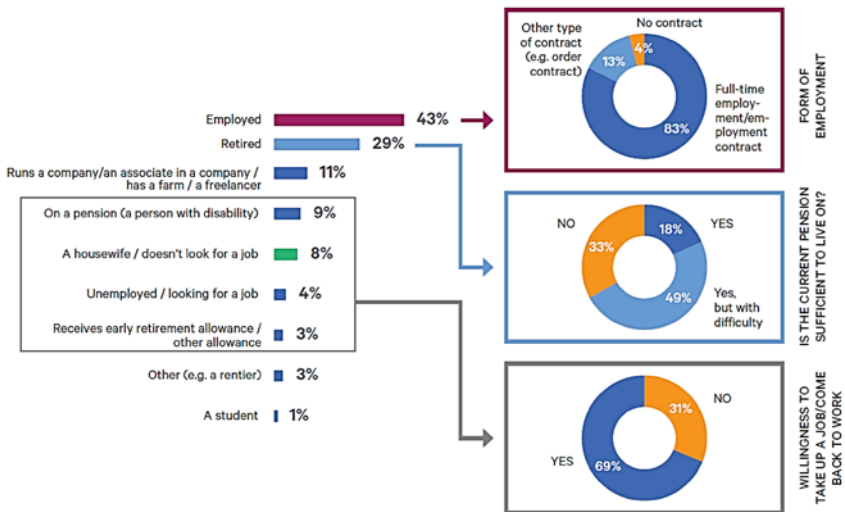
Among the women who are not currently retired, the declared awareness of the amount of their future retirement pension is not high – only 52% of the respondents stated they knew it. The vast majority of respondents have great concerns about whether the amount of the future retirement pension will allow them to live a decent life – 63% of the respondents indicated that they are afraid that their pension will not be enough for them to live on, whereas another 30% claimed that it will be enough, but with difficulty. Only 7% of the respondents indicated that the future retirement pension will fully satisfy their needs. It is worth emphasising that the younger the respondents were, the more negative opinions about the future retirement pension they expressed.

We obtained a worrying, yet interesting distribution of answers to the questions about the possibility of self-development. The need for professional development and ambitions related to a professional career are not the most important in the hierarchy of mature women's needs, because the first place is taken by the family and responsibilities related to the household. As many as 73% of the respondents indicated that their family/home responsibilities are more important than a professional career. In turn, 57% of the respondents stated that they learn new things when it is necessary for their work, and 48% because they want to develop professionally. Only slightly more than one-third of the respondents (36%) stated that their family and friends support them in their professional development and career, and 32%

considered professional development and career as a way to achieve their personal dreams and goals. The vast majority of mature women do not plan any changes related to their professional activity in the near future – only 22% plan to change or find a job that suits them better, whereas 5% plan to start their own business. It is worth noting that in the opinion of mature women, this group needs support in the area of employment and education – on average 73% of the respondents said ‘yes’, and in the group of those who take care of others the percentage of affirmative answers was as high as 79%.

#### 4.2. Current Professional Situation

According to CATI research results, it can be concluded that the professional situation of mature women in Poland is diversified (see Fig. 2). More than half of the respondents are professionally active (54%). About 43% of the respondents stated they are employed, and 11% indicated running their own business or pursuing a freelance profession. Among the employed, 83% indicated a full-time employment contract, 13% indicated a different type of contract (part-time employment contract, a civil law contract) and 4% of the respondents described their professional activity as work without any contract (i.e. in the so-called grey area). The respondents who said they were retired (29%) were asked to assess whether the amount of pension was

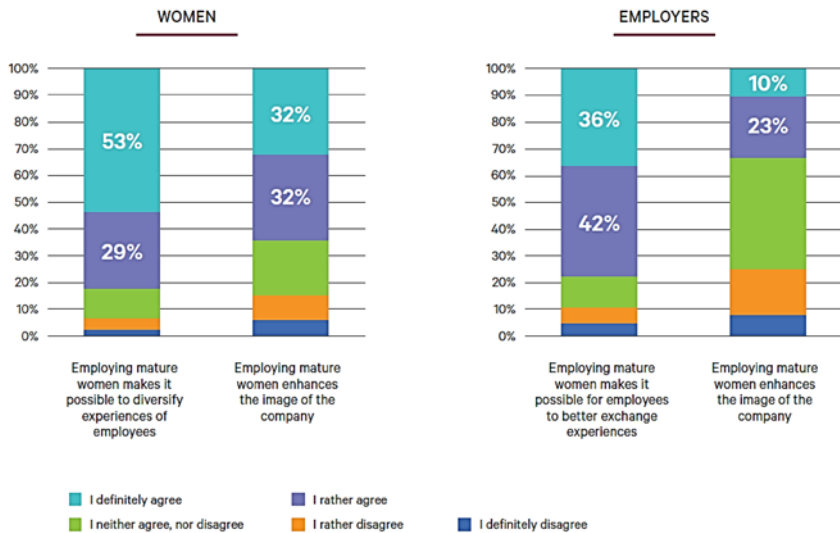


Source: Own elaboration based on CATI research results.

**Fig. 2. The Professional Situation of Mature Women in Poland.**

sufficient to satisfy their daily needs. The responses were not optimistic. Only 18% of this group indicated that the retirement pension was enough for them to live on, another 49% indicated that it was enough but with difficulties, and as many as 33% gave negative answers. Another group of respondents (24%), including those on disability pension (9%), not working and taking care of their household (8%), unemployed (4%) or on a bridging allowance (3%), were asked about their willingness to take up employment or return to work. In this group, 69% of the respondents expressed their willingness to undertake professional activity. The remaining 31% of the respondents who did not want to enter the labour market were asked about potential arguments that could convince them to take up employment. The most common answer was a difficult financial situation (31%) and better state of health (15%). It is worth adding that 26% of the respondents from this group indicated the lack of any argument that would convince them to undertake professional activity.

In the group of mature women and in the group of employers, we asked a question about the opinions concerning the employment of mature women, and presented the answers obtained from both groups in Fig. 3. The analysis of the distribution of answers shows that the issue of employing mature women is perceived differently by employers and by mature women themselves. The latter believe that employing mature women makes it possible to



Source: Own elaboration based on CATI research results.

**Fig. 3. Opinions on the Impact of Employing Mature Women on the Functioning and Evaluation of the Organisation According to CATI Research Carried Out Among Mature Women and Employers.**



diversify experiences among employees and improve the company's image. Even greater differences in the assessment performed by both groups were observed in the case of arguments convincing employers to employ mature women. While both groups agreed that the key arguments included professional experience and qualifications (40% in the group of mature women and 50% in the group of employers), there was a significant difference in the evaluation of the importance of life experience – this argument was indicated by 30% of mature women and only 9% of employers.

Another area covered by the CATI research was the participation of mature women in educational activities. Only 30% of the respondents admitted that in the last five years they had taken part in some form of education. It is worth noting that the majority were improving their professional qualifications (62%) or digital skills (22%). Even fewer – only 24% – declared their willingness to continue education in the future. On the other hand, in the group of employers, as many as 64% of answers to the question about the need for further education of mature women were affirmative (mainly in the field of digital skills and professional qualifications – approximately 80% of the respondents declared the need for further education).

#### 4.3. Values Important in the Life of Mature Women in Poland – Differentiation Due to the Characteristics Taken into Account in CATI Research

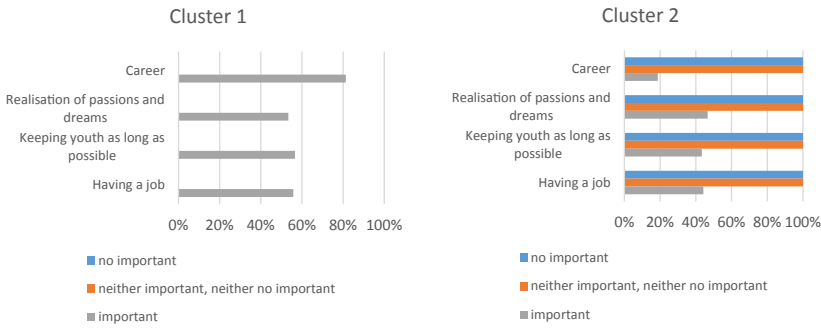
Another area covered by the CATI research was values important in the life of mature women. The hierarchy of values influences the activity of mature women in the labour market, and is believed to be important when making decisions and choices. It is also connected with self-esteem, including the evaluation of professional attractiveness. The research covered the following values:

- (1) family/helping children/parents, etc.,
- (2) professional career,
- (3) active life,
- (4) obtaining a retirement pension that makes it possible to live a decent life,
- (5) developing passions and pursuing dreams,
- (6) staying in good health as long as possible,

- (7) staying young as long as possible,
- (8) having a job and
- (9) being independent from others.

The values were assessed using a five-point scale: completely unimportant, rather unimportant, neither important nor unimportant, rather important and very important. The opinions expressed by women allowed us to divide them into groups. Due to the fact that the basis for the classification should be variables with sufficient differentiating properties, these properties were assessed in the first step. The differentiation of the opinions concerning the importance of specific values was checked with the use of the coefficient of variation calculated by comparing the standard deviation of a given variable with its mean value. The obtained values of the coefficients of variation ranged from 10% when assessing the importance of maintaining good health as long as possible to 34% for the professional career. In the further analysis, only those variables (values) were taken into account that were characterised by sufficient differentiation, that is, the value of the coefficient of variation at the minimum level of 20%. The adopted threshold value resulted from the literature review in this field (Everitt, 2002; Reed, Lynn, & Meade, 2002). Ultimately, the variables that were qualified for the further part of the analysis included (2) professional career, (5) developing passions and pursuing dreams, (7) staying young as long as possible and (8) having a job. For the purposes of the classification, the values of variables were taken into account after aggregation into three states: important (initially: very important and rather important), neither important nor unimportant and unimportant (initially: completely unimportant and rather unimportant). As a result of classification, we obtained two clusters, which appeared to be the best solution characterised by the best values of measures of model quality assessment. The Silhouette measure of the coherence and distinctiveness of individual clusters was 0.6, which proves high quality grouping (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 2005). The characteristics of both clusters are shown in Fig. 4.

The first cluster included only those people who evaluated all four values in classification as important, that is, the respondents who value their professional career, the fact of having a job, the opportunity to develop their own passions and fulfil their dreams, for whom it is also important to stay young as long as possible. The second cluster included the remaining people – those who considered at least one of these characteristics to be unimportant or neither important nor unimportant. The number of people in both clusters was similar and amounted to 470 and 540 people, respectively, which gives the percentage of 46.5% and 53.5%. The characteristic that differentiated the



Source: Own elaboration.

**Fig. 4. Characteristics of the Clusters Obtained in the Classification of Mature Women.**

two clusters the most was professional career, for which we noted the highest share in the first group of women who considered it to be important in life (81.3%) and the lowest share in the second group.

On the basis of the obtained classification results, the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of the respondents in specific clusters were calculated due to the metric characteristics and answers to other selected questions included in the research questionnaire. The analysis of the results made it possible to evaluate the diversity of values important in the life of mature women characterised by different categories of features, different situations or attitudes. In the research we took into consideration, among others, demographic characteristics, family situation, financial situation, educational activity and issues related to taking care of other people. In the first cluster which included respondents open to development possibilities and placing great importance on work and career there was overrepresentation of women from the central region and cities with more than 500,000 residents. The share of women who assessed their financial situation as very good, who planned further educational activities (e.g. training courses) and who evaluated the amount of future retirement pension as not sufficient to live a decent life was also higher than the percentage share for the entire sample. On the other hand, the underrepresentation in the first cluster occurred mainly for women living in medium-sized towns with a population of 100–199,000 people in the Mazowieckie region, evaluating their current financial situation as very bad and their future retirement pension as fully sufficient to live on. Women who do not regularly take care of other people, including people with disabilities, had a lower share in the cluster than the percentage share for the entire sample. However, the differences in relation to the mean in this case were slight – less than 3%.

The characteristics that did not have any differentiating significance were mainly the age group and the fact of having a stable relationship.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Referring directly to the research questions posed in the introduction to the chapter, it should be stated that the analyses carried out indicate that the perception of mature women in Polish society does not favour undertaking or maintaining professional activity by them. In Poland, a mature woman is perceived stereotypically as a guardian of hearth and home rather than someone pursuing a professional career. For mature women, career does not take a high place in the hierarchy of values. The most crucial for them is family and the state of health. Especially, the latter might be a serious obstacle in entering or re-entering the labour market, but it can also favour the decision about leaving a job when the family expects that, even at the cost of living on a very low retirement pension. Nevertheless, the most serious barriers to professional activity of mature women are their unwillingness and lack of need.

While carrying out CATI research on representative groups of mature women and employers, we found differences in the perception of mature women as potential employees. While the undisputed key arguments used by both groups are work experience and qualifications, it seems that women overestimate the significance of their life experience. The results of the research show that this is not a convincing argument for employers and not a reason for hiring someone. What employers value in mature female employees is their flexibility and availability, as well as possible financial incentives from the state. Further differences are visible in the approach to training and improving one's qualifications. Employers see the need for special training courses for this group much more than mature women themselves. Such courses should concern mainly digital skills because employers tend to think that these are the competences which female candidates usually lack. For employers, a positive social perception of employing representatives of this group is of little importance – any decisions about hiring them result from a natural need rather than a willingness to improve the company's image. According to the research results, overestimating one's own IT skills or not seeing any gaps in this area, as well as overestimating life experience in the workplace, are the main reasons for possible recruitment failures in the group of mature women. Proper preparation of this group for entering the labour market is undoubtedly a task for supporting institutions and training companies. It is also worth considering sending the right message to employers, communicating the strengths of mature women as potential employees.

## NOTES

1. The POWR.04.03.00-00-0017/18 project financed under Measure 4.3 of the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development, co-financed by the European Social Fund for 2014–2020, carried out by Dobre Kadry. Centrum badawczo-szkoleniowe Sp. z o.o.
2. Semiotic Solutions sp.j. is one of the few companies in Poland that professionally deal with semiotic research. It has been operating on the Polish market since 2005 under the license of the British company Semiotic Solutions UK. The company uses a methodology that is unique in the world, based on semiotics and cultural anthropology. For more information visit [www.semiotyka.com](http://www.semiotyka.com).
3. IQS Sp. z o.o. is a Polish research and analytical company operating in the market for over 25 years. For more information visit <https://grupaiqs.pl/pl>.
4. Binary oppositions are important for understanding the basic semantic mechanism, but they do not make it possible to describe the deeper structure of the analysed phenomenon. The use of the semiotic square increases and improves the recognition of the analytical classes by increasing their number from two (good/bad) to four (good/bad, not-good and not-bad).
5. According to [de Saussure \(1995\)](#), a sign is a combination of two elements: the signifier (e.g. a word or a picture) and the signified (e.g. meaning of the word or the picture).

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## Chapter 3

# SANDWICH GENERATION WOMEN IN SEARCH FOR MEANINGFUL WORK AND LIFE

*Mervi Rajahonka and Kaija Villman*

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses female managers' and entrepreneurs' views on lifelong learning. The main empirical data were drawn from interviews with 67 women participating in training and coaching programmes in South Savo, Finland, in 2017–2021. Many of the women belonged to the working sandwich generation (WSG). The particular focus was on how lifelong learning relates to these women's careers, wellbeing at work, work–life balance and search for meaningful lives. A model integrating women's earning, learning and meaning aspects of work and life was developed. The findings of the study show that considering women's fragmented work careers, lifelong learning is often crucial for them. For an individual, opportunities for lifelong learning and meaningful work assure personal development, wellbeing at work and a sustainable career. For employing organisations, offering opportunities for learning and meaningful work for their employees constitutes a competitive advantage.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The change in Western countries towards service and knowledge economies has changed the demands of work. Organisations must renew themselves



continuously to keep up with the competition. Skilful management of human capital has become increasingly important for organisations (World Bank, 2019). It is obvious that there is a critical need for employee training and lifelong learning. Meanwhile, the growth of service industries has offered new career opportunities for women and increased women's working hours (Ngai & Petrongolo, 2017; World Bank, 2019).

Moreover, in the fast-changing world, people are increasingly searching for balance and meaning in their lives. Work and employment are no longer seen merely as a way to earn money, but people want their work to be interesting and meaningful, full of opportunities to learn new things and grow and consistent with their values. This applies especially to the younger generation, but this phenomenon can be seen in every age group today (CIPD, 2017).

This chapter discusses female managers' and entrepreneurs' views on lifelong learning. We build on theories of human capital (HC), lifelong learning and women's work-life balance. The particular focus of the study is on how lifelong learning relates to these women's careers, wellbeing at work and search for meaningful lives. Many of the women we interviewed belonged to the working sandwich generation (WSG). The research questions are as follows. (1) How do female managers and entrepreneurs, especially those belonging to the WSG, use lifelong learning in advancing their careers? (2) What is the role of lifelong learning in ensuring their wellbeing, work-life balance and meaningful lives?

The chapter is organised as follows. First, the literature is reviewed on the following themes: changes in the working life, theories and concepts related to HC and lifelong learning and the careers and work-life balance of women. Next, the methods and data collection are presented. Thereafter, the empirical findings of the study are discussed. Finally, a discussion and concluding remarks are presented.

## 2. THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK

Western countries have experienced a significant change in the structure of their economies in the recent decades, including weakening manufacturing sectors, growing service sectors and increasing usage of outsourcing (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). These changes have been reflected in the structures and demands of working life. HC and its constant improvement are extremely important.

In order to remain competitive, societies and businesses need an ever more highly educated and skilled workforce whose competences are regularly

updated (Aspin & Chapman, 2001). Skills readjustments for the changing requirements of working life must happen increasingly somewhere else than in compulsory education, and for that reason, lifelong learning is needed (World Bank, 2019). Further, people themselves need to take more responsibility for their career development. They must also ensure that they have the ability to learn and adapt, gain general competences that are valid across organisations and build strong social networks (Garavan, Morley, Gunnigle, & Collins, 2001; Lyons, Schweitzer, & Ng, 2015; Terjesen, 2005). Nowadays, careers consist of repeated developmental cycles, and employees may change their jobs and organisations frequently or even have multiple careers, meaning that the careers become ‘boundaryless’ (Mirvis & Hall, 1994).

For organisations, this situation also means that if their employees feel that they are not constantly learning new things and growing in their work, they may feel stagnant and begin to search for new job opportunities (Rodriguez, 2008). Employers have to compete against each other to get the best employees. The best way is to pay attention to the motivational factors of work, in addition to money, by offering learning and developing opportunities at work, challenging and diverse tasks, social relations, good leadership, work–life balance, flexible timetables and working hours favouring employees (Kultalahti, 2015).

### 3. CONCEPTS AND CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF HC

Investments in people, for example, in their knowledge creation, education, training or health, increase their productivity. These investments can be called HC. The concept was taken into wider use after noticing in the 1950s that a major part of economic growth could not be explained by the increase in physical factors, such as machinery, number of workers or financial capital. The reason behind this growing residual was considered to be the increase of efficiency of labour; in other words, the increase of HC due to, for example, knowledge creation through education and training (Goldin, 2016).

Diverse definitions of the HC concept are built around the characteristics of people employed in organisations, some of them taking into account, besides intelligence, the ideas, skills, creativity, etc., of people, and also their wellbeing and learning potential (CIPD, 2017). The importance of learning and innovation has been emphasised in the definition of HC as: ‘the human factor in the organisation; the combined intelligence, skills and expertise ... capable of learning, changing, innovating and providing the creative thrust ...’ (Bontis, Dragonetti, Jacobsen, & Roos, 1999). The health and

wellbeing aspect has been emphasised, for example, by the World Bank (Lim et al., 2018).

Several other theories may be discussed in the context of HC. The resource-based view (RBV) was originally introduced by Penrose (1959), becoming one of the main theories of strategic management (Newbert, 2007). RBV describes how a company may gain sustainable competitive advantage using the resources it possesses. These resources have to be valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009). Based on RBV, organisational resources can be divided into three groups: physical and organisational capital resources and HC resources (CIPD, 2017).

RBV has been criticised for having a too-static view and failing to explain how resources can be developed and companies can adapt to dynamic and turbulent environments (CIPD, 2017; Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001). Therefore, Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997) introduced the concept of dynamic capabilities (DC), referring to companies' ability to transform internal and external competences to respond to fast-changing environments. DCs are processes that attract, integrate, reconfigure and release resources to match or create market change (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Wright et al., 2001). They include four key processes: learning, reconfiguration, leveraging and creative integration (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009).

Opponents of the HC perspective have also pointed out that seeing people as mere means and resources used in the economy is reminiscent of slavery (Cockburn-Wooten, 2012; Goldin, 2016). Contradictions can arise if employers treat their employees merely as resources, while employees seek work which provides a sense of meaning in their lives. For an individual, the meaning aspect of work may be of the utmost importance. The formula for meaningful work includes that a person knows themselves and understands what is expected, and how to realise the objectives of work (Steger & Dik, 2010). It has also been stated that besides the characteristics of the work itself and the person's sense of self, a sense of balance is also needed (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). For many people, learning and development opportunities in work are important aspects of meaningful work (CIPD, 2017).

#### 4. CONCEPTS AND CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF LIFELONG LEARNING

There are several ways to frame lifelong learning. In any case, the concept includes that all people, whatever their age, need to learn, change and improve in order to keep up with the demands of changing working life. The personal-level

definition of lifelong learning by Jarvis (2007, p. 123) emphasised a ‘process of transforming experience into knowledge and skills, etc. and resulting in a changed person, one who has grown and developed as a result of the learning’. The European Commission (2001) similarly defined the concept broadly as ‘all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective’. This kind of wide definition is not bound to viewpoints of merely adult learning or economy, and includes all learning activities, ranging from formal and non-formal to informal and incidental.

Summarising these perspectives we can conclude that lifelong learning has at least three complementary objectives: *at the level of individuals*, personal fulfilment, active citizenship, employability and adaptability; *at the level of the economy*, innovation, economic progress and growth; and *at the level of society*, higher gross domestic product, social inclusion and wellbeing (Aspin & Chapman, 2001; European Commission, 2001).

Lifelong learning – as any learning – includes four types of learning: learning to know things (knowledge), learning to do things (skills), learning to become oneself (personal development) and learning to collaborate (Jarvis, 2007, p. 111). Furthermore, research has distinguished single-loop learning, meaning adapting to existing situations, and double-loop learning, challenging the status quo and enabling change (Kang, 2007). Research has shown that innovating small firms have adopted higher-order, that is, double-loop learning, and therefore are better at information management, compared to their counterparts (Chaston, Badger, & Sadler-Smith, 2001).

Despite the fact that lifelong learning is highly important in organisations, the demands of constant lifelong learning and especially courses offered by employers are not necessarily attractive to every employee. Jarvis (2007, p. 133) noted that employers cannot expect their employees to attend courses at their own expense and at times which endanger their work–life balance. It has been said that adults-as-learners want to be self-directed in their learning, are motivated to learn when they see needs learning would satisfy, have experience as the main resource in their learning and that their individual differences increase with age (Trotter, 2006).

## 5. CAREERS AND WORK–LIFE BALANCE OF WOMEN

In constantly changing modern working life, people do not stay for decades working for the same employer in the same job, and they may even change their profession now and then. It has been claimed that today on average,

employees change job every 4.5 years (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). Therefore, the traditional linear career models do not reflect the complex career developments of the contemporary workforce, and they are particularly unsuitable in relation to the careers of working women (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). More importantly, organisational practices are no longer in line with the changing needs and attitudes of employees. This may lead to workers, but especially women, changing jobs, starting their own businesses or leaving the workforce entirely (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007, 2008). Related to women, there is also a new concept coined for this phenomenon, 'opt-out', referring to the migration of professional women from the workplace (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016).

There is a challenge around women's work-life balance with its roots in societal qualifications of 'a good mother' versus 'a good father', which are still different (James, 2013). These expectations reflect enduring attitudes that the main responsibility for taking care of home and children lies with women, limiting women's opportunities to work outside home and advance in their careers (Jewell, 2011; Rajahonka & Villman, 2019). According to European Union (EU) statistics, part-time work is much more common among women: 30% of women compared with 8% of men in 2019 worked in this way (European Commission, 2020). Furthermore, if women have more children, their employment percentage goes down; the opposite happens for men (European Union, 2020).

In the EU, only one-third of managers are women and women's salaries are lower compared to men's (on average 15%, but for managers 23%) (European Union, 2020). Furthermore, top-level positions are still extremely male dominated. The share of female chief executive officers in listed companies in EU member countries is on average 6.3% (FinnCham, 2018). The share of women executives has been increasing, particularly in the younger generation, but still it can be stated that the 'statistics are the result of a combination of some women plateauing in middle management, and other women leaving their employers' (Walsh, Fleming, & Enz, 2016).

Several issues have been mentioned as reasons why women do not advance in their careers. Stead and Elliott (2013) mentioned 'floating stereotypes', that is, that leadership is still perceived as 'men's knowledge'. In addition, it has been argued that the interrupted nature of women's careers due to family commitments, etc., depresses women's HC, leading to fewer promotions and lower pay (Terjesen, 2005). Moreover, women have lower work-related social capital, because their networks fulfil more social than utilitarian purposes (Schuller, 2017; Terjesen, 2005).

For women, becoming an entrepreneur may be a way of balancing family responsibilities and work, but also a way of escaping the 'glass ceiling'

(Rajahonka & Villman, 2019; Terjesen, 2005; Walsh et al., 2016). Female entrepreneurs represent about 30% of entrepreneurs in Europe. In particular, women own the clear majority (78%) of one-person businesses (European Commission, 2014; Pappas, Papagerasimou, Drigas, Raftopoulos, & Nikolaidis, 2017). Research has shown that women are motivated to start their own businesses because they want to increase their independence and flexibility, have new challenges and develop their skills and experiences, whereas for men, economic factors are often the most important motivation to start a business (Akehursta, Simarro, & Mas-Tur, 2012).

Several metaphors were presented in research describing women's challenges in their careers or work–life balance. Carli and Eagly (2016) described women's careers as a labyrinth, because although there has been slow improvement in women's admission to leadership positions, they still have challenges throughout their careers, fighting against gender stereotypes and discrimination in wages and promotions, a lack of networks and greater responsibility for childcare.

Sullivan and Mainiero (2007, 2008) illustrated women's careers with a kaleidoscope model, where changing patterns of life are formed whenever the tube is rotated and pieces of glass in the kaleidoscope move and make a new decoration, arranging women's relationships and roles in new ways. Three mirrors in the rotating kaleidoscope reflect different aspects of women's lives: *authenticity*, being true to oneself; *balance*, making decisions so that all parts of life are taken coherently into account; *challenge*, demonstrating autonomy, control and responsibility, and at the same time learning and growing. The importance of these aspects varies depending on circumstances and as women age. Sullivan and Mainiero (2008) observed that young women are often keen on searching for challenges, middle-aged women with or without family responsibilities for balance and mature women for authenticity. In each time and situation, women fine-tune their sights through the kaleidoscope bearing in mind all aspects to find the best fit matching their needs considering work, relationships and prospects. In particular, women often work out their career actions in light of their impact on other people around them, hence practising relationalism (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). The people impacted may be spouses and children, but also ageing parents, friends, people met at hobbies or volunteering work, etc.

Sullivan and Mainiero reminded that one of the keystones expressed through authenticity in their model is that women – as all people – search for meaning in their work and lives. As a result, women frequently want to work in organisations whose missions are in harmony with their own values (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). Largely in the same way as Sullivan and

Mainiero, O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) also discovered that younger women living in the so-called 'idealistic achievement phase' see no limits and have trust in their possibilities to 'do it and have it all'. Middle-aged women, in the 'pragmatic endurance phase', have multiple responsibilities and 'muddle in the middle' and mature women (aged 46–65) see their careers as opportunities to learn and to make a difference to others. O'Neil and Bilimoria called this third career stage the 'reinventive contribution phase' and claimed that for mature women, success means recognition, respect and integration of life. Therefore, particularly these women want to contribute meaningfully through their work. However, it is important for all working women to get support in achieving a better work–life balance (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005).

Because there are often breaks and changes in women's careers, women need to adapt and learn flexibility in relation to their lives and careers. It has also been claimed that particularly human and social capital and adaptability contribute to women's employability (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Considering women's fragmented work careers, lifelong learning, that is, updating knowledge and skills by attending courses or learning by doing while working, is often crucial.

It also worth mentioning that women aged 45 and over increasingly find themselves in situations where they must combine their career with care for their loved ones from two generations. They are called the WSG. In Western countries, core families are typically quite small. This leads to situations where there are not too many siblings sharing care responsibilities for elderly parents. In ageing societies with diminishing public funding for the care sector, people live longer in their own homes. WSG women have to balance their work and care responsibilities. For example, they may feel permanent hurry and stress, or they may not be able to work or pursue for their career interests (Kärki, Marjanen, & Hernandez, 2019). This situation of double care tasks also impacts the health of the WSG (See Chapter 7 in this book 'Sandwich Generation in the Workplace – International Comparative Research' by Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and Urszula Zaluska).

Next, we present the research design and discuss the findings of the empirical study.

## 6. RESEARCH DESIGN

Here, we discuss theories, concepts and models of lifelong learning and human resources based on the current literature. For the background, we conducted a literature review of theories related to lifelong learning, HC and women's work–life balance.

The empirical data were drawn from interviews with women who participated in training and coaching programmes in South Savo, Finland, in 2017–2021. The data were collected mainly through face-to-face interviews. The first phase involved around 40 individual interviews with female managers and entrepreneurs, conducted at the beginning of the DigiJoko training programmes (2017–2019). Seventeen of the same women attended two focus group discussions at the end of the programmes. Based on these interviews, an initial version of the model integrating women's earning, learning and meaning aspects of work and life was developed. Furthermore, in the second phase, when conducting interviews with women attending the Time4Help Finland project (2019–2021) at the beginning of the training, work–life balance was discussed and additional focus group interviews were conducted with one of the groups (five women) and with the Time4Help Finland project steering group (five women) in 2020 and 2021 to gain a deeper understanding about how working women tackle their work–life balance and care responsibilities. Based on these interviews, to better consider the dynamics of women's care responsibilities, the model was slightly modified. The data analysis process was multi-staged. The data were first coded, and then the codes were theorised to link the collected data with theories.

Qualitative methods were used because we want to increase understanding of how women relate to lifelong learning, and how lifelong learning relates to their careers, wellbeing at work, work–life balance and search for meaningful lives. Qualitative research methods are particularly appropriate in the early concept development phases of research, when there is a need to increase understanding of real-life events and a need to generate clarifications for phenomena or create and test theories (Eisenhardt, 1989; Voss, Tsikriktsis, & Frohlich, 2002).

The point of view of the research is that of an individual, especially a female manager or entrepreneur. Themes of the interviews and group discussions dealt with, among other issues, education, career, skills, lifelong learning, life situation, work–life balance and wellbeing.

The training and coaching programmes were arranged especially for women to develop their leadership skills suitable for the fast-changing world. The women attending the training and coaching programmes were working in several sectors, about half (33 women) as entrepreneurs, and the rest as managers (23) or experts (11) in companies and other organisations. The most common sectors were consulting (21 women), health and care (16) and other service sectors (18). Their ages ranged between 35 and 65 years, about one-sixth of them being under 45, two-thirds between 45 and 55 and one-sixth older. A total of 67 women attended the training and coaching programmes,



in the first phase (DigiJoko) 42, and in the second phase (Time4Help) 25 women. Almost all the women in both programmes had children, but we did not ask about their other caring responsibilities. For confidentiality reasons, the names and organisations of the women are not given.

## 7. FINDINGS

Next, based on the literature and empirical findings, a model is introduced, taking into account different aspects in women’s lives and careers. The model uses concepts presented in the literature, and shows how earning, learning and meaning aspects of work and entrepreneurship are entangled (Fig. 1).

The model was developed based on our empirical findings and the literature, the main inspiration being the kaleidoscope model presented by Sullivan and Mainiero (2007, 2008). The model is dynamic and its elements are in constant movement. Every aspect in the model affects the other aspects, so that debating and balancing the aspects is the main issue of interest for women. Situations change constantly, demanding repeated evaluations of how to find the best balance between the aspects.

The learning aspect of the model includes personal development, learning new things to advancing the career or just for fun. The meaning aspect includes



Source: Authors’ original work.

**Fig. 1. A Model Integrating Women’s Earning, Learning and Meaning Aspects of Life, Work and Entrepreneurship.**

personal values and motivations, hobbies and interests, care responsibilities, living environment and life situation, but also family, friends and other important social relationships. The earning aspect includes work and career, and the basis for the individual's economic welfare and livelihood. These aspects are linked, and the idea is to try to find the best balance between them in ever-changing life situations. If one of the aspects consumes a woman's energy and resources, this reflects in other aspects. For example, if care responsibilities are very challenging and eating up all the energy and resources, this implicates challenges and a narrowing perspectives in work and personal development. Life becomes a struggle from day to day, and no plans or dreams for a better future can be prepared or realised. On the other hand, if, for example, the family situation is empowering, there are positive reflections in the earning and learning aspects; or vice versa, if the situations concerning work or learning are excellent, this brings extra resources to the meaning aspect, for example, care responsibilities.

For many of the interviewed women, lifelong learning seems to be a driver for every aspect presented in the model. Learning generates new prospects for finding both earning and meaning in life. Learning strengthens self-esteem and increases wellbeing, but also opens new career options. Learning new things also increases women's HC, as it typically offers new and improved tools to succeed at work better, and in this way increases the meaningfulness of work. Work is meaningful if the employee feels that she has control over her work, if she can constantly learn something new, and if she has opportunities to apply the new knowledge and skills.

One of our interviewees stated that it is most important for her that her work is meaningful, and this has occasionally led to bad career choices, because she has changed jobs whenever she had the feeling that she did not have control over her work. Another woman pointed out that after she had understood that she only had one life and stopped trying to separate work and the rest of her life, things got easier. Based on the interviews, we can argue that besides family-related reasons, changes of interests or financial reasons can also sometimes make radical decisions necessary for a woman, such as turning her career around and learning a new profession.

Next, the aspects of the model and the reasoning and choices women make in their lives are illustrated with quotations from the interviews in more detail.

Debating between learning and earning:

*I have studied constantly for 10 years while working all the time. I think that my studies have been a big reason why I am in this job right now.*

*Attending to training has given me self-confidence, strength and courage to think about, how to renew my business .... Learning is a big thing, but the benefits you usually only see later.*

Debating between earning and meaning:

*I started my own business. I liked my job, but I had a wish to work how I wanted.*

*It has been hard to find a balance between family and entrepreneurship, but if I had had a regular job, it would not have been possible to give so much time to the family. But then again, work has been very important for me – it has given me time for myself and a break from family and its worries.*

*We moved to this town when my husband started his job here. My own job has to be flexible because I have a family.*

Debating between learning and meaning:

*Training, meeting other people and discussing with them has been an investment to myself and my wellbeing at work.*

Wellbeing and balance aspects:

*I remember having first customers coming to us when my third child was five days old .... Flexibility is the first thing that comes into my mind when I think about balancing my career and family life.*

*There were signs of burnout. Now I have tried to learn to say ‘no’ at work.*

*Everybody makes millions of life choices! Getting older makes you more conscious about them.*

## 8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of our study show that the fragmented careers of women make lifelong learning of the utmost importance. Lifelong learning is a driver for every aspect of life, assuring both personal development and wider career opportunities. Wider opportunities offer flexibility whenever situations

change. Flexibility is one of the success factors in how WSG women can deal with change. Changing situations demand constant evaluations of how to find the best balance between different aspects.

Many of the interviewees emphasised the critical role of studies and continuous learning in advancing their careers. Further, many explained that they had advanced in their careers by learning new things at work, getting involved in new projects and not being afraid of challenges. Moreover, lifelong learning makes life more interesting and creates a sense of meaning in life and work. Meaningful work includes components of self-knowledge and reaching for valuable life goals. Learning opportunities in work are important aspects when pursuing meaningfulness at work.

Having meaningful work with lifelong learning opportunities is also an important balancing factor for many of the interviewed women, improving their wellbeing. In other words, a very important aspect related to their work–life balance is that they have options to learn and develop while working. In addition, the findings of our study show that women are constantly balancing different aspects of their lives. Previous research and the empirical findings in this study suggest that reaching an appropriate work–life balance is a very important aspect in WSG women’s lives. It must still be remembered that for many women, work–life balance is not easy to reach, but learning to know oneself better offers methods towards a better work–life balance.

Our research shows that 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 into their private life. At the same time, an opportunity opens for them to learn something new, based on which they can build meaningful lives for themselves. But then again, if the family situation is challenging leading to the individual just struggling from day to day, this is reflected in their work, where the perspectives become narrower and the struggle for survival replaces development initiatives or plans for the future.

Our findings support the previous research, as we find that 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 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. It has been shown that if employees perceive that their employer supports their career development, they have better job satisfaction (Walsh et al., 2016).

This means that organisations should offer their mature female employees opportunities to learn constantly and flexibly and build human and social capital while working. Further, organisations should offer women challenging, ‘entrepreneurial’ or business development roles and proper career advancement, as well as flexible working arrangements, which guarantee them a good work–life balance (Kultalahti, 2015; Terjesen, 2005).

In fact, cherishing the work–life balance of all employees is an extremely important issue in modern working life that every employer should address. This has become even more important with the increasing use of information and communication technologies at work. Consequently, for many workers work has become much more flexible. On the one hand, this is extremely positive, because an employee can decide when and where to work. On the other hand, there is a danger of work sneaking into leisure time if an employee is not able to draw the line between work and private life (Rajahonka & Villman, 2019). This aspect could be seen in the interviews of this study.

Our study also corroborates the observations presented in previous research that today’s working life does not entirely fulfil the needs and expectations of modern employees, something especially true for women (Grönlund & Öun, 2018; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). Namely, many of the interviewed women in this study had chosen to become entrepreneurs, because they felt that meaningfulness of work and work–life balance were easier to reach that way in changing life situations.

The chapter contributes to the discussion on lifelong learning and the mechanisms of how it can help advance women’s meaningful and well-balanced careers and lives. The limitations of this study include that the empirical material was gathered from a rather small group of women in South Savo, Finland. The data are rather limited and therefore, the conclusions may not be widely generalisable. More research is needed on women’s careers and on the effects of lifelong learning and better work–life balance on organisational success.

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## PART B

### TOOLS AND CASES

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## Chapter 4

# FAMILY SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISORS BEHAVIOUR FOR THE SANDWICH GENERATION: CONSID- ERATIONS FOR TRAINING PRACTICE

*Miet Timmers and Tim Gielens*

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the specific role employers and supervisors (SVs) can play in assisting the working sandwich generation (WSG) to find a good balance between work, dual care responsibilities and family. After a brief overview of the main concepts and ideas, the focus lies on the concept of family supportive supervisor behaviour (FSSB) defined as behaviours exhibited by SVs that are supportive of employees' family roles, in relation to health, well-being, and organisational outcomes. Based on the insights from qualitative research and a tested training concept, points of consideration are formulated for SVs in supporting the WSG. In addition to concrete tips in the area of general policy, learning objectives have been formulated for a supportive leadership style for the WSG, accompanied by a self-assessment tool.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, research on work–family conflict (WFC) has focussed on the working population in their early and mid-career, when most families have younger and dependent children. The literature usually assumed an inverted U-curve whereby working people experienced the most severe conflict

between work and family responsibilities in the middle of their career. This assumption is being questioned and the idea of an older working generation with few family obligations is being challenged (Thrasher, Zabel, Wynne, & Baltes, 2015). Life events such as adult children returning to the parental home, informal care for elderly parents or parents-in-law or the illness of a partner or divorce at a later age call for a much more nuanced view of the older working generation. There is increasing evidence that older employees who combine work with a caregiving role and the working sandwich generation (WSG) in particular experience increased WFC (Aazami, Shamsuddin, & Akmal, 2018; Burke & Calvano, 2017; Clancy, Henle, & Fruhauf, 2020; DePasquale et al., 2017). In order to reduce the WFC, several actors have to play a subsidiary role (Den Dulk, Peper, Kanjuo Mrčela, & Ignjatović, 2016) such as governments, supporting organisations, the working population itself and their families and last but not least the different actors of the workplace context: employers, supervisors, HR professionals and colleagues.

This chapter explores the support that the work environment can offer to the WSG to better balance the dual care task with a family, specifically highlighting the crucial role of the direct supervisor (SV) through the adoption of family supportive supervisor behaviour (FSSB). To this end, we give practical recommendations for employers and SVs to better support the WSG in the workplace both through policy recommendation and through a specific FSSB training for the WSG.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL MODELS

The bundle of practices of supportive measures that can take place within the workplace to support the combination of family and work receives various terms within the literature such as family supportive practices (Turgeman-Lupo, Toker, Ben-Avi, & Shenhar-Tsarfaty, 2020), work–life balance policies (Perrigino, Dunford, & Wilson, 2018), work–family supports (Masterson, Sugiyama, & Ladge, 2021), etc. .... Often this refers primarily to the more instrumental opportunities that can help workers at different stages of life to achieve a better work–life balance. Depending on the legal framework and current opportunities, it can cover a wide range of possibilities and practices ranging from flexible work schedules and leave options to on-site childcare centres or ironing services. However, the scale at which these practices are offered, the ease of access to them for both women and men from different life stages and different organisational positions and the perception of their supportiveness, is largely determined by organisational culture. Thompson,

Beauvais, and Lyness (1999) define a supportive work–family organisational culture as the ‘shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organization supports and values the integration of employees’ work and family lives’ (p. 394).

Coinciding with this, it is evidenced that the immediate SV in particular plays a crucial, linking and gatekeeping role in both access to opportunities and perceptions of family supportive practices (Brady & Hammer, 2021; Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009; Kossek, Petty, et al., 2018; ter Hoeven, Miller, Peper, & den Dulk, 2017). A SV can be stimulating but can also adopt an unsupportive attitude towards family supportive practices installed by the higher management level (Kossek, Odle-Dusseau, & Hammer, 2018). Hammer et al. (2009) have developed a multidimensional measure of FSSB. FSSB is defined as the portrayed behaviour of the SV that is supportive of families and that provides support that makes the employee feel emotionally and instrumentally supported by the SV.

The FSSB includes four types of behaviours: emotional support, daily job and personal problem solving, role modelling and acknowledgement of the strategic importance of work–family issues, also known as proactive and creative work–family management. Emotional support is ensuring that people feel cared for, that their feelings are taken into account and that they feel comfortable in approaching their manager about family issues when necessary. Instrumental support is reactive and refers to work–family behaviours in the form of flexible working hours. Role modelling refers to SVs demonstrating themselves how to balance work and family in the workplace, by signposting to employees what is acceptable behaviour in terms of work–family balance. Creative work–family management is proactive and innovative and involves action on the team level. Examples of creative work–family management include thinking about how work can be organised to reduce WFC while improving both a team’s and an individual’s performance, and challenging organisational assumptions about how time is used and how work is done. An increasing number of studies show a positive effect of FSSB on improved work–family balance (Greenhaus, Ziegert, & Allen, 2012; Kossek, Petty, et al., 2018), work motivation (Bosch, Heras, Russo, Rofcanin, & Grau i Grau, 2018), job satisfaction and physical and psychological health (Crain & Stevens, 2018).

### 3. A FSSB TRAINING FOR SVS OF THE WSG

FSSB is not a personal characteristic, but a behaviour that can be influenced by, for example, targeted training. There is mounting evidence that training

in which SVs learn how best to support their employees, both in their work role and non-work roles can have many positive effects on well-being, health and turnover intentions (Brady & Hammer, 2021). The literature has already described various elements that can be part of an FSSB training such as a web-based introduction, face-to-face role playing, discussion boards and cognitive self-monitoring for different work contexts (Brady & Hammer, 2021; Kossek, Odle-Dusseau, et al., 2018).

Within the framework of the Flemish Time4Help programme, two webinars with SVs and HR professionals were conducted. They were modelled on the training framework developed by Brady and Hammer (2021) and Hammer & Kossek (2013) and using input from qualitative research described in Chapter 1. The training consists of four parts: (1) presentation of the specific situation of the WSG with attention to how work can play both a positive and a negative role in well-being; (2) ideas for general family supportive practices and policies which can be interesting for the WSG; (3) introduction of the four components of FSSB with a special emphasis on practical considerations for the WSG; and (4) introduction of a self-monitoring tool for FSSB including a specific gender and generation perspective. This chapter provides some key points of consideration that may be inspiring to both practitioners and researchers.

(1) *The specific situation of the WSG and the role of work:*

- A training course for SVs should provide insight into the complex and varied reality of the WSG, although the situation should not be over-problematized but it should be indicated that a double care role in combination with a job creates specific challenges.
- Attention to the WSG should be based on a broad view of a generation-sensitive policy where generational aspects are approached in a positive way and where the different generations can be illuminated and supported in a positive way.
- For many people from the sandwich generation (SG), work is an important source of energy in their lives. Work keeps them from ‘drowning’ in their caring roles. In this respect, it is important that the WSG receives sufficient support, both from the general policy, their direct SV and their colleagues. A motivated WSG is an important source of support and experience within an organisation.
- Quantitative and qualitative information about the WSG can strengthen awareness building and understanding. The various chapters in this publication provide plenty of inspiration for this. It is important to take

into consideration that there are clear gender differences in the perception of FSSB and that employees with a good financial situation often feel better supported than employees who consider their financial situation (very) poor. Particular attention should be paid to male and financially disadvantaged employees.

*(2) Ideas for general family supportive practices and policies which can be interesting for the WSG:*

- The WSG regularly needs time to schedule care tasks or has a need for flexibility in response to the unexpected. If the WSG is able to function in a work environment that allows them to sufficiently determine how their working time is organised, the combination of a dual care task with a job can be a great success. This makes the combination of a double care task with a job much more manageable.
- In some jobs, it is not possible to build flexible hours into the work schedule. It can therefore be helpful if the SG can take the initiative, by switching shifts, for instance, or taking a (half) day off with brief notice.
- Teleworking can be an important tool for all generations to better combine work and family life and also achieve efficiency gains. This also applies to the WSG. The COVID-19 experience has provided a boost in the digital homeworking skills of all homeworkers, including the WSG. A nuanced and supportive telework policy will be a continuing aspect of FSS in organisations now and in the future.
- The holiday policy of companies can mean a lot for the balance between family and work. Some companies take the private situation into account when granting leave or have priority rules for specific groups of employees when choosing their leave dates. For the SG, it is important that this not only benefits younger families, but that employees with other caring responsibilities are also taken into consideration. Many sandwich workers use their holidays to look after their grandchildren during the school holidays or to plan care activities. It may be equally important for some sandwich workers that there are also opportunities to take unpaid leave.
- In several countries, there are already leave possibilities whereby employees can reduce their working hours temporarily or partially, while retaining certain rights and with possible financial compensation. In addition, as a result of The European Work–Life Balance Directive of 2019, additional legal possibilities will arise in various EU countries, such as a special carers' leave: workers providing personal care or support to



a relative will be entitled to five days of leave per year. Employers can promote these opportunities in a positive way and lower the barriers to access for women and men of all generations and from all functions and positions in the company.

*(3) Introduction of the four components of FSSB with a special emphasis on practical considerations for the WSG:*

Supportive measures from the organisation's policy are a prerequisite for creating a family-friendly climate. However, these measures will only be truly effective if they are accompanied by genuine support from the direct SV. In other words, the direct SV is the most important link in a family-friendly climate. A training course explains the four components of FSSB and provides tangible guidance that can support the WSG.

- *Daily job and personal problem solving.* The SV assists individual employees in solving the daily and practical problems that arise in connection with the combination of family and work. The WSG is often faced with urgent and unforeseen circumstances and must be able to respond quickly and accurately. Sometimes it is a matter of a long-term relief from work, for example, when a family member is hospitalised. Together with the WSG, the SV looks for possibilities adapted to the specific situation, such as adjusting working hours, assignments or deadlines at the request of an employee; giving the employees themselves the opportunity to make adjustments; providing information about possibilities such as carer's leave, palliative leave, etc.
- *Emotional support.* The SV is open and empathetic and offers room for employees to talk about family-related issues. The SV listens compassionately and recognises that it can be difficult to balance work and family life.

Specific to the WSG:

- The SV asks open questions and shows interest without being indiscrete.
- The SV respects the emotional strain, feelings of guilt and role overload that may accompany dual care responsibilities.
- The SV does not compare people and considers individual situations.
- The SV will let it be known if he/she has experience with care situations him/herself without comparing their situation to the care situation of the co-workers or presenting him/herself as a role model.

- *Role modelling.* The SV's own attitude tells a lot about the expectations of the SV towards the employees. Organisations can only promote a good combination of family and work if the managers also show that they try to maintain a good balance themselves and set an example, being careful not to speak or act in a normative way. The SV is able to draw a clear line between work and family, for example, by not sending an abundance of messages outside working hours. In addition, the SV can tell about his/her own search for good combination strategies and how this involves trial and error. For the WSG, it is certainly also important to discuss generational differences between colleagues in dealing with priorities, hours and flexibility.
- *Proactive and creative work–family management.* The SV improves the effectiveness of employees in a proactive, strategic and innovative way. The SV organises the work in such a way that employees can organise their job as efficiently as possible and ensure that the work organisation is beneficial for a positive balance between family and work. This creates a win–win situation for the organisation and for the employee. For the WSG, it is important that the SV primarily takes a positive attitude towards all work–family opportunities provided by the company and the legislator and helps promote these opportunities for both women and men and employees of different ages. In addition, especially after the COVID-19 experience, it is important to develop a balanced and supportive telework practice at team level. It is also important that the SV is sufficiently participative in organising the work and distributing tasks.

#### (4) *Self-assessment instrument:*

The training ended with the opportunity for the participants to engage in self-reflection and set their own goals with which to grow in family supportive leadership. For this purpose, a specific instrument was developed according to the following framework:

- *Step 1: Register:* What is my 'default' leadership style? What family supportive behaviours do I already display as a SV? How does this come across to my employees?

Over the next two weeks, map out the four sub-aspects of family supportive leadership by 'monitoring' your own behaviour. Always look at each of the four aspects of a family supportive leadership style and at an open attitude as a general condition. Ideally, you should repeat this exercise after four weeks and thus register again for a fortnight the four sub-aspects of family supportive leadership that you express to your staff.

- *Step 2: Analyse and reflect.* Looking back, which aspects of family supportive leadership do I use frequently and/or sufficiently? Which aspects can I still strengthen? Which family supportive leadership behaviours do I not yet use?
- *Step 3: Formulating specific objective(s).* What are challenging but achievable goals to grow towards a (more) family supportive leadership style?
- *Step 4: Contextualising.* What support is needed from your organisation to help realise the goals?

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Similar to employees from other life stages, it is important for the motivation and well-being of the WSG to have sufficient formal and informal support at work for combining a dual care task with a job. Both general policy and informal support from the direct SV are important in this regard. This chapter offered a model that gives HR staff and SVs concrete tools to support the WSG. Building on the training model proposed by Hammer and Kossek, we developed a holistic tool that focusses on FSSB but at the same time highlights the importance of family supportive policy and practices. Some important conclusions also emerged from the testing. (1) A training should not only focus on the improvement of informal support offered by SVs but should sufficiently embed this in concrete recommendations in general support measures and a general supportive family climate. (2) Providers of training should sufficiently emphasise that a focus on the WSG does not prevent, but rather encourages, inclusive policies. Framing efforts aimed at improving FSSB as beneficial for WSG but for other groups of workers as well could help prevent potential resistance occurring in certain groups of workers which are not directly targeted by the training intervention. Moreover, framing could lower the possibility of WSG feeling stigmatised by the training efforts. (3) A self-selection effect whereby primarily participants are attracted who already have a high sensitivity for FSSB should be taken into account. Being approachable and emphasising the win-win is important in communication. (4) The proposed training and self-assessment tool have mainly an important awareness-raising effect. To achieve actual behavioural change in the support offered by direct SVs, it is recommended to organise a (peer) coaching programme as a follow-up, an important aspect beyond the scope of the current research project. Future research could take into account actual change in FSSB and focus

on measuring the mid- to long-term effects on WSG and on the organisation as a whole by including follow-up programmes into the research design.

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# Chapter 5

## TOOLS DEVELOPED IN AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE *TIME4HELP* PROJECT IN POLAND

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### ABSTRACT

*The chapter discusses the objectives and assumptions of the Time4Help project in Poland, where solutions were developed for the target group of women aged 45–65. The authors described parts of the model solution and the process of testing it which, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was performed remotely. The conclusions from the testing stage were used to prepare the final version of the Time4Help model.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The main objective of the *Time4Help* project in Poland (implementation period: December 2018 – January 2022) was to develop new solutions to support mature women at the age of 45–65. In order to achieve it, we strove to motivate the representatives of this target group to enhance their attractiveness in the labour market by improving their skills and qualifications through various forms of lifelong learning. The need to develop solutions to support mature women in Poland resulted from the analysis of their professional and family situation.<sup>1</sup> The project included extensive primary qualitative (individual in-depth interview (IDI), focus group interview (FGI)) and quantitative (Computer assisted telephone interview (CATI)) research that was preceded by a literature query and desk research ([European Commission, 2021](#); [Eurostat,](#)



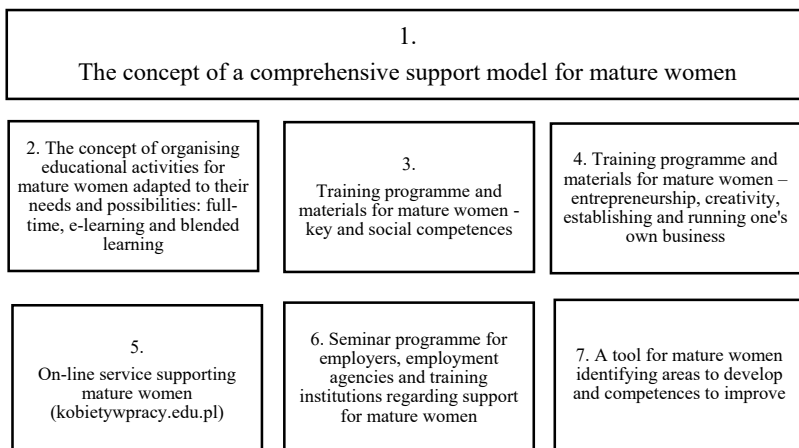
2020, 2021; Report on semiotic research carried out as part of the Time4Help project, 2019). The addressees of the research were, on the one hand, mature women, and on the other hand, the representatives of employers and employment agencies. The model solution took into account the characteristics of mature women belonging to the sandwich generation (SG), whereas its potential users are employers, training institutions and employment agencies (Evans et al., 2016; Friedman, Sung, & Wiemers, 2017; Silverstein, Tur-Sinai, & Lewin-Epstein, 2020). As for employers, it is important to make them sensitive to the specificity of the situation, needs and limitations of mature women. This can be done by learning more about current or potential employees from this group and by providing tools that facilitate their employment and professional development. The involvement of training institutions is an important issue in the context of changing the activity of mature women in the labour market. It is because their training offer makes it possible to bridge the competency gaps and equip women with competences and skills expected by employers. Another group consists of employment agencies that look for suitably prepared job candidates, assess their development needs and provide HR consulting services. The first version of the model solution was tested both in the group of mature women and in the group of users. Conclusions drawn from the testing stage contributed to the development of the final version of the model.

## 2. TEST VERSION OF THE MODEL

In its test version, the *Time4Help* model consisted of seven parts schematically presented in Fig. 1. These parts are interrelated and complement each other, thus creating a comprehensive solution offering various tools to support mature women.

A brief description of the objectives, target groups and content of individual model components:

- Part 1. The concept of a comprehensive support model is addressed mainly to the users of the *Time4Help* model. Its purpose is to briefly present the content and assumptions adopted in the model, to facilitate the selection of the parts most adequate for specific needs, and to help to prepare the entire model or its part for implementation in a given entity. In this elaboration, we also presented the characteristics of mature women and indicated the main arguments justifying the selection of this group as requiring support in the educational and labour market. In the model implementation procedure for potential users in the form of a diagram, we showed subsequent steps leading to the effective implementation of the model.



Source: Own elaboration.

**Fig. 1. The Components of the *Time4Help* Model.**

- Part 2. The concept of organising education for mature women is addressed mainly to training institutions and contains basic information on the specificity of mature women as participants of courses and training, as well as guidelines for organising their education in a non-formal system. In this chapter, we presented a short description of formal, non-formal and informal education as well as traditional and modern teaching methods. We discussed the process of learning of a mature person, the role of motivation in this process, existing barriers and strengths, as well as weaknesses of mature women. We pointed to their needs and expectations, placing particular emphasis on the group of women who want to return to the labour market and those who belong to the SG.
- Part 3. The training programme and materials assume 120 hours of workshops aimed at strengthening the key and social competences of mature women. Each workshop has been described in a syllabus consistent with the European and National Qualifications Framework. The proposed set of training courses is a response to the demand reported by mature women and employers who employ them or want to employ people from this target group. The subjects were selected in such a way as to improve practical skills in the areas useful not only in the labour market but also in private life. This part of the model is dedicated mainly to training institutions, and its purpose is to facilitate the planning, preparation and implementation of training courses in the scope relevant to the development needs of mature women.

- Part 4. The training programme and materials assume organising training in small groups. Its aim is to improve the competences in the field of entrepreneurship, creativity and establishing as well as running one's business, including cooperation with other participants of the project. The training course involves 20 hours of classes conducted using the elements of LIFT methodology (learning in facilitated teams – methodology dedicated to team learning) and design thinking. Each training course has been described in a syllabus consistent with the European and National Qualifications Framework. The addressees of this part are mainly institutions offering training whose aim is to structure the development path, help to create professional plans and prepare programmes for their implementation with strong embedding in the market realities.
- Part 5. The online service has been divided into three main areas: self-improvement, work and outside of work. Each of them contains distinct pictograms/icons, specific colours and thematically selected content. The service was created mainly for mature women, and its core objective is to help this group with their professional development and activation in the labour market. The service was built using the Wordpress content management system, and it is possible to use it on mobile devices. An integral yet independently functioning part of the service is the online version of the Women's Self-Assessment Tool, which is part 7 of the model.
- Part 6. The programme of the seminar involves 4-hour meetings for three groups of model users: employers, employment agencies and training institutions. The aim of the seminars is to equip participants with specialist knowledge allowing them to understand and explain the specificity, conditions and limitations of professional and educational activity of mature women; to present the results of research on the situation of mature women in the labour market and in private life; to familiarise participants with the idea of the model and its parts; to analyse the needs and possibilities of support for mature women by implementing the model in a given group of users. This part of the model may also be helpful for coaches conducting training in the age management and diversity in the workplace.
- Part 7. The tool has been developed in the form of tests allowing a given person to independently assess and diagnose her development needs. Its aim was to enable free, quick and easy access to information about, for example, one's own practical skills increasing the probability of successfully finding oneself in the current workplace, evaluation of the level of motivation to develop one's skills and the ability to define

pro-development attitudes or type of work or activities most adequate for individual preferences. The tests were developed in an offline and online form. The offline form was prepared in an MS Excel spreadsheet, and it contains basic formulas for calculating the results and presenting them graphically in charts. In the online form, the tests were programmed and linked to the website (part 5 of the model). They allow users to complete questionnaires and obtain results – quantitative and descriptive – in the same way as in the offline version.

Four parts of the model solution assume direct involvement of mature women, therefore it is worth presenting them in greater detail, especially training, online service and self-assessment tools. As part of the development of key competences (part 3 of the model), we suggested specific topics, mainly in the field of practical use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in professional work and learning foreign languages. The set of training in the ICT area includes:

- using a spreadsheet in budget planning and management,
- creating content for operating new media,
- operating online services based on the content management system,
- online security and the basics of general data protection regulation (GDPR) in using the Internet and
- using new payment technologies useful in business.

The aim of the training, apart from improving the skills of the practical use of ICT, was also to influence the use of interactive tools and the Internet in private and professional life, which is of particular importance during the pandemic. A traditional way of learning a given foreign language has been replaced by competence training in the scope of foreign language learning. The purpose of the workshops is to identify a flair for learning foreign languages and preferred styles of learning, to find out about effective methods of learning foreign languages and to increase independence in learning and managing the process of mastering a given language. As far as social competences are concerned, we put emphasis on the analysis of strengths of image building (also in relationships) and improving the ability to work in diverse teams, including intercultural teams or teams consisting of people with disabilities.

The training in part 4 of the model consists of two modules of creative workshops. In the first module, we assume group work in producing innovative and user-friendly solutions in the field of one's own professional activity (i.e. business activity), the use of design thinking and creative work tools taking into account different points of view (i.e. looking at a problem from

different perspectives), and the principles of the human centered design methodology (creating solutions with people and for people). In the second module, we plan to familiarise participants with the tools of effective financial management and ways of determining the level of profitability of the conducted business activity. During classes, participants are expected to learn to evaluate the profitability of their business and create solutions that can improve it.

The online service for mature women ([kobietywpracy.edu.pl](http://kobietywpracy.edu.pl)) consists of three main areas:

- Self-improvement – a place where one can find information about training courses available on the market and other development opportunities. The most important content: a guide on how to retrain oneself, information on lifelong learning, motivational advice, a guide on entities supporting changes in professional activity.
- Work – an area dedicated to professional development. It contains a guide on how to find a job, write a CV, prepare for a job interview and do well in it, as well as various forms of employment. Some of the content is related to establishing and running one's own business.
- Outside of work – an area of personal development with a lot of useful information about, for example, civil rights, green living, consumer rights, EU subsidies for 'green home' investments, etc. It also includes tips on how to manage one's own home budget, live a healthy lifestyle and keep the right life balance.

For the purpose of the training, the online service was prepared in a way enabling participants, as service administrators and under the guidance of an instructor, to operate it, connect it with profiles in social media and add more content. Additionally, we prepared the fourth area called exchange of ideas. It is a forum dedicated to exchanging ideas and sharing knowledge with other people. Users can access it after logging in.

In the self-improvement area there is a link to tools (tests) enabling users to perform self-assessment of their development needs and professional preferences (part 7 of the model). The questionnaire of the 'development needs' tool consists of 75 statements that can be evaluated on two scales – adequacy for the current situation of the person and the willingness to develop in a given area. The statements cover several areas of development, including practical skills essential for finding a job and professional activity (e.g. recruitment documents, self-presentation, IT tools and foreign languages), motivation for development (e.g. pursuing a goal, willingness to learn new things, openness

to changes and action planning) and development of skills (e.g. creating relationships with others, self-confidence, communication, perceptiveness, stress resilience, time management and initiative and creativity). The test results are calculated as self-assessment of a current situation and self-assessment of the willingness to develop a given area. The questionnaire of the 'professional preferences' tool consists of 32 pairs of statements. Specific elements of the pair represent preferences which, to a greater or lesser extent, characterise the behaviour, views or attitudes of the person undergoing the evaluation in the work environment. The statements were grouped into four main categories, each of which includes two bipolar scales: Preference 1 – cooperation and independent work scales, Preference 2 – exerting influence and performing assigned tasks scales, Preference 3 – independence and safety and stabilisation scales and Preference 4 – diversity and predictability scales. The test results were presented in a chart indicating the prevailing scale within a given preference. Both tools can be used for self-assessment as well as for evaluation performed together with a counsellor/coach/psychologist who, based on test results and additional information obtained (e.g. in the form of an interview with the person completing the tests), can provide educational and career counselling. Both tools are available on [kobietywpracy.edu.pl](http://kobietywpracy.edu.pl). Part 7 of the model also contains the instruction on how to work with the tool for the person undergoing the evaluation and additional person performing it, a key enabling score calculation and a description of specific scales which is the basis for the interpretation of test results and planning development activities or making decisions related to one's professional life.

### 3. TESTING IN TARGET GROUPS

The tests in the group of mature women took place from October 2020 to April 2021. After the initial diagnosis of competences, needs and development motivations performed during discussions with the psychologist and coach, we qualified 32 participants from all over Poland for the project. The women represented various backgrounds; they had a different level and field of education, different life and professional experience, different family situation and current employment status. Participation in the project was divided into two stages. The first one included group training (9–12 people), in which the participants could develop their key skills and social competences. The second stage was dedicated to the issues of entrepreneurship, creativity, establishing and running one's own business, and was carried out in small groups of 4–5 people. During both stages, all the women also participated in

meetings with a psychologist/coach. Each participant had three meetings lasting at least one hour – the first one during the recruitment stage, the second one after the end of the first stage and the third one at the end of participation in the project. The aim of the first meeting was to analyse the participant's potential, whereas of the second one – to verify the potential and readiness to take up independent challenges and, consequently, to recommend assigning to a specific group in the second stage. The purpose of the last meeting was to assess the improvement of competences and to develop proposals for further development activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic complicated the testing phase initially planned in a traditional form. The necessity to switch all activities to remote mode resulted, on the one hand, in the need to take additional actions, and on the other hand, in problems with completing the project in accordance with the planned course. Additional activities mainly concerned the development of tools to motivate and maintain the participants' motivation to participate in the project remotely. A large percentage of women who decided to participate in the project required various types of support; some were very confused, and the pandemic made this situation even worse. Remote classes forced a partial shift of the emphasis from skills to knowledge and severely limited relationships between participants. The difficult period of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the accumulation of organisational difficulties in professional/private life and the necessity to give up previously made commitments. Some of the women gave up participation in the project for various reasons: an illness, the need to take care of dependent people, a lack of time and conditions for effective participation in training at home. Hardware problems and poor bandwidth/stability of the Internet connection were also additional obstacles. It is worth emphasising that the specificity of participation in remote training, which in a way ensures anonymity and no need to take responsibility for one's acting, facilitated the decision to withdraw from the project. On the other hand, it is possible to point out some advantages of organising all activities in remote mode. For example, we could qualify participants from the entire territory of Poland, and many of them had an opportunity to improve their digital skills in the field of Internet platforms (mainly Zoom).

Summarising the stage of testing in the group of mature women, 32 entered the project, 13 quit it during its course and 19 completed it successfully. Each participant could take part in a total of 128 hours of group training, including 108 in the first stage and 20 in the second one, and benefit from the support of a coach/psychologist and individual training meetings.

The conclusions from the testing stage were formulated on the basis of the results of research carried out in groups of mature women and representatives

of solution users applying various research methods. The research was conducted during the testing stage, at the end of it and during the evaluation of testing results. We used surveys completed by project participants, coaches' observations and their individual assessment of activity of project participants, focussed group interviews with participants and coaches, opinions given by coaches/psychologists, opinions given by experts taking part in the debate summarising the testing stage and opinions of seminar participants for the groups of users. The conclusions concern various areas, from the recruitment process and the organisation of support, through the subject scope of training and methods of conducting classes, to the shape of the model and its components. The main recommendation concerns the form of classes, which for the group of mature women should be conducted in a traditional, not remote, way. Actually, this is how they had been planned in the original version of the model, but the epidemiological situation imposed a different method of implementation. The recommendation results not only from the level of digital competences of mature women and the availability of equipment/Internet connection ensuring trouble-free remote communication. It is also about building personal relationships that help to take up professional challenges and limit involvement in family matters – effective delegation of tasks to other family members (good and reliable methods tested by other participants, previous experience, avoiding problematic issues). In the group of women aged 45–65, at least so far, there has been no confidence in raising such topics of conversation with the use of remote communication. Another issue concerns customising the training offer, that is, offering different development paths to different participants, organising forms of support on a patchwork basis (taking into account the previous experience and level of competences and development needs in the context of professional plans) and ensuring the possibility of choosing several training subjects from a larger pool. According to the participants, the following aspects are also important: the possibility of individual meetings with coaches in order to practise selected elements of a given subject, enabling the exchange of personal experiences, preferably during face-to-face meetings, dividing participants into groups according to their level of advancement (especially in the case of ICT training), organising training courses on certain subjects only in a traditional form that allows participants to experience specific situations (e.g. the specificity of cooperation with people with disabilities). As part of recruitment and promotion processes, it is advisable to provide clear information on goals and methods of providing support together with its expected results, as well as to introduce teasers helping people learn about the content and usefulness of a given course. In the group of coaches and people taking care of participants during the testing



stage, there were also recommendations concerning proper methodological preparation of coaches for educating adults and enabling participants to perform additional exercises, prepare for classes and check the level of understanding of a given topic. According to experts, it is necessary to prepare (in one part of the model) information about the research results concerning the situation of the SG (due to the ‘transparency’ of the phenomenon for most groups of potential users of the model solution, despite a high level of phenomenon in Poland, especially in the case of women working full time). We also recommend developing a concept of an individual path of professional and educational activity of a mature woman, both for employers and supporting organisations, and for mature women themselves.

#### 4. THE FINAL MODEL VERSION

The final version of the *Time4Help* model consists of seven elements which are partially modified versions of the test model, and partially new solutions resulting from recommendations after testing. The main changes involve the introduction of a report from the qualitative research conducted in the project into the model solution and development of two guides on the individualisation of the education process of mature women. The research report is a background for considerations on the importance of the discussed subject and the occurrence of the SG phenomenon in Poland. The guides contain guidelines for potential groups of users of the model solution and mature women. The parts included in the final version of the model are as follows:

- (1) The concept of a comprehensive support model for mature women along with the implementation procedure – suggestions for solutions and possible activities.
- (2) A report with the results of an in-depth analysis of the needs in terms of professional and educational activity of mature women, taking into consideration the specificity of the SG group.
- (3) The concept of an individual path of professional and educational activity of a mature woman – a methodical and organisational guide for employers and organisations supporting mature women.
- (4) The concept of an individual path of professional and educational activity of a mature woman – a guide for mature women.
- (5) Training programmes and training materials – improving various skills and competences mature women.

- (6) Online service supporting mature women – self-improvement, work and outside of work.
- (7) A tool for mature women to assess their preferences (a preferred style of action) and development needs (strengths and competences that require improvement) – offline and online.

New solutions were prepared within the framework of parts 2–4 of the model. In part 2, we discussed the results of research conducted on representative samples in Poland and in selected European countries (the research results and conclusions are presented in Parts A and C of this book). Parts 3 and 4 of the model contain information about: the characteristics of mature women, including the specificity of the SG; the stage of assessing the needs and resources of mature women; selection of training activities in the form of patchwork and other forms of support; and implementation of these activities, indicating the conditions for success. These elaborations contain similar issues, but they differ in the approach towards the subject and the perspective of a potential reader. Part 3 is dedicated to a group of users. It was prepared in a formal style and contains a lot of information confirming the need to engage in the issues of activating mature women and to adapt certain activities to their needs and possibilities. Part 4 is addressed to mature women. It is a typical guide, and it was developed in an informal style. It contains information about, for example, the possibility of improving one's position in the labour market by undertaking various types of activities, including educational and motivational ones, in the field of adjusting professional work to one's own situation and effective communication with the environment. As for the other elements of the model, the main change concerns the combination of training courses in key and social competences with those in creativity into one part of the model solution for supporting mature women.

#### NOTE

1. Some of the analyses and their conclusions are presented in Chapter 2.

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# Chapter 6

## CASES AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE TIME4HELP PROJECT IN FINLAND

*Kaija Villman and Mervi Rajahonka*

### ABSTRACT

*The chapter describes a model solution for supporting mature women, developed as part of the Finnish Time4Help project. The solution includes training programmes for mature women supporting their careers and networking. The model is built on a new flipped training and coaching programme approach where, first, women were asked to gather a group of peers who were interested in developing their enterprises or working skills and who had similar needs and interests to them. After that, a programme was built matching the needs of this group of women. This model resembles the study circle approach particularly popular in the Scandinavian countries. Therefore, the authors build on the research literature on study circles, and study how tailored programmes help mature women to develop their careers and reach a work–life balance. The empirical part of the research builds on interviews and observations with 25 women in 5 groups and their facilitators participating in Time4Help training programmes in Finland in 2019–2021.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Time4Help Finland project supports the career development, leadership, entrepreneurship and wellbeing of women aged 45–65 in rapidly changing working life by developing, testing and implementing new solutions for

women's career paths and skills promotion. The training and coaching programmes organised in the project included service business coaching packages for mature women for updating and developing their skills and increasing their wellbeing at work. The training programmes were built matching the needs of the groups of women. The tailored programmes resembled study circles. In this chapter, our research question is: how can tailored training programmes support mature women's careers, lifelong learning and networking and help them to reach an appropriate work–life balance?

## 2. STUDY CIRCLES AS AN EXAMPLE OF TAILORED TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Study circles are described as small groups of people who meet to discuss a particular topic. The topics discussed can be almost anything, but the difference from other groups is that a study circle focusses on a topic of common interest, not just socialising between the members. Originally, they emerged in Sweden in the late nineteenth century, linked to the change in society from agrarian to industrial. In the middle of the century, a law on compulsory education was introduced in Sweden, raising the question about how to educate illiterate adults (Velichko, 2004). An important aim of study circles in Sweden was to increase citizens' solidarity and political participation. However, the topics studied were not limited to political and social issues, but regular school topics and literature could be studied, too (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010).

Although the idea of study circles spread all over the world, they are still particularly popular in Sweden, where they are the most common form of adult education, as almost two million people attend circles every year. People older than 50 years particularly attend study circles, because other education types concentrate on younger people (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). Study circles are an especially suitable learning method for adults, because in them the learners are their own knowledge managers, deciding what and how to learn. Study circles are an important method of 'learning by sharing'. People learn to discuss, show consideration for others and share responsibility (Bjerkaker, 2014).

Typically, there is no teacher in a study circle: members sitting in a circle are equals sharing their knowledge and skills and learning together from each other. However, there can be a facilitator guiding the discussions and stimulating the group by offering reading material, for example (Bjerkaker, 2014). The circles can meet for weeks or months. There are no exams and no grades are

given. Study circles always have a beginning and an end, and there are time-lines and deadlines for systematising the work (Riel, 2014; Velichko, 2004).

Usually, study circles are said to be at their best if the group is rather small, but not too small. Often the optimum size is mentioned to be around 5–15 persons – the size balancing diversity and a feeling of togetherness (Bjerkaker, 2014; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010; Riel, 2014; Velichko, 2004). The group usually decides the objectives, content, materials, modes of cooperation, etc., together. At the beginning, there should be activities for building trust, guaranteeing that every member contributes (Riel, 2014). Besides constructive discussions of the whole study circle, the methods used can be individual tasks or group work in pairs or bigger groups (Velichko, 2004). It is valuable to provide flexibility in the work during the process, so that members can change plans if needed (Bjerkaker, 2014; Campbell et al., 2001).

Even if the circle has a facilitator, they are not a leader of the process, but rather a trust-builder and follower and sharer of members' contributions. Often the hardest part to understand for the members is the cultural change towards collective leadership; each member has the responsibility to contribute and be a leader. Digital tools can make this kind of distributed work easier, but the interaction patterns and social norms are more difficult to change (Riel, 2014).

There are certain pitfalls of study circles. Bjerkaker (2014) refers to Bystrom (1976) and mentions that study circles can develop into coffee parties, school classes or therapeutic groups, where the purpose of the circle is distorted. Coffee groups do not have any objectives, school classes have a teacher and pupils and therapeutic groups focus on members' mental and social problems.

There are other concepts very close to the concept of study circles, including learning communities and communities of practice. There are similarities, and these concepts are also often used interchangeably. All these concepts build on a common assumption that everybody has valuable knowledge and experience they can share with others. However, if you want to draw a difference between the concepts, study circles are for sharing knowledge, for open dialogue and deep reflection to develop solutions, whereas in learning communities and communities of practice people make a deeper commitment to support each other. Today, study circles can also be organised online (Riel, 2014), and can be used as a method in massive open online courses (Ronkowitz, 2018).

Next, we discuss the empirical findings building on interviews with 25 women and their facilitators participating in Time4Help training and coaching programmes in the South Savo region in Finland in 2019–2021.

### 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The Time4Help Finland project held a continuous open call for groups of women who wanted to develop themselves. Women were asked to gather a group of like-minded peers who were interested in developing their careers and had similar needs and interests. After that, a training programme was built matching the needs of each group of women. Peer discussions on wellbeing and the development of women's careers were popular themes, as well as objectives to co-design services and support networking. Up until now, there have been five groups consisting of five to seven women in the Time4Help Finland project. Almost all the participants were over 45 years old and working either in their own company or in other organisations. There were no other prerequisites. Many of the participants also had care responsibilities in addition to their career: it was not mandatory to have these responsibilities in order to attend.

Before a training and coaching programme started, the project manager discussed with all the participants first separately and then in a joint meeting where the group agreed on the objectives and practical arrangements like times, dates, duration and place. Based on the discussions, the project manager suggested a facilitator for the group or the group suggested a facilitator they preferred. Typically, the groups met five times in meetings lasting 3–4 hours, and if necessary, the facilitator could arrange short Q&A online discussions (1–2 hours) between the meetings. Next, we present insights on the groups and their dynamics by describing each group as a case.

#### 3.1. Case 1

The first group consisted of sole entrepreneurs. Four of them knew each other beforehand as they had already started to develop joint service offerings before forming a Time4Help training group. The group wished to work based on service design methods, because they were somewhat familiar to them. The selected facilitator was a service design specialist. The objective of the group was quite clear: to develop service packages consisting of services offered by all the participants, which could be offered to customers together. Despite this clear objective, the service design process raised issues which the group members had not discussed before, making hidden tensions visible. Due to this, the members had different views about the joint target. Maybe because of the tensions, the group members could not agree on an appropriate division of tasks between the meetings.

Therefore, the meetings had to be used for joint working, not for sharing results. Although the group did not complete their joint service packages during the Time4Help process, four of them continued working together with the same issues after the process.

*This training model was hard to understand at first: what it was and what could be done within it. But after getting that, there was a real need, and the training served the group well .... As we knew each other, it was not peer learning, but a co-development process. (Participant, Case 1)*

### 3.2. Case 2

The second group consisted of women working in the travel and customer experience industries. Most of them were owners of small businesses. At the beginning, the objective of the group was to develop new services for each company, but also to discuss possible cooperation opportunities. Wellbeing at work did not come up as an important theme in the preliminary discussions. However, the situation very soon changed, after the COVID-19 pandemic started closing the women's livelihoods. Therefore, the focus of the group very soon shifted into wellbeing at work and life issues. The facilitator of the group stated even that it was not certain whether the women and their businesses would have survived the hard times without the mental support of this group of peers who they could talk to. It was also important that the small group could meet face-to-face, so that trust between members could be built. Another trust-building technique was to have the meetings by turns in each participant's facilities. This was a way to give each woman an opportunity to tell her own story in her own environment and on her own terms. The women did not know each other too well in the beginning, so this was an entirely new group of peers for them. Even though the wellbeing themes were the most important, at least some business cooperation was also started during the process. Moreover, the process strengthened the women's networking, as they continued their meetings after the Time4Help process ended.

*The COVID-19 spring brought uncertainty. In the end, we decided that there was no choice but to continue developing new services. (Participant, Case 2)*

*Every meeting was really empowering. The group gave me energy and helped me to cope. (Participant, Case 2)*



### 3.3. Case 3

The third group consisted of women working in patient and family associations who wanted to develop their activities and start offering joint services to the private or public sector. The group had a shared challenge and objective – the shrinking public funding for associations and the need to co-develop new services they could offer to customers together. The work of the group focussed on service co-development with service design methods. However, as working in patient and family associations is sometimes very consuming, wellbeing at work issues were also discussed. In the end, even though no joint service offerings were launched, the participants wrote funding applications together for a new joint development process. The participants learned about service design and service co-development. The process also strengthened their networks: even though most of the participants knew each other beforehand, they learned to better understand each other's values and ways of doing things. In a way, this case dealt with women's wellbeing at a meta-level, because most of the associations in Case 3 offered services for women, for example, for domestic violence victims or people who cared for sick or elderly family members.

*Service design methods have not been used in associations before.  
It was eye-opening for many to see how things could be developed.  
(Participant, Case 3)*

### 3.4. Case 4

The participants in the fourth case live in a small town in a rural area of South Savo. The basic idea of the originator of the group was to get an opportunity to develop her own services in a service design process and increase women entrepreneurs' networking in the town. However, as most of the participants worked in the health or social care sectors, development of joint service offerings was also seen as possible. Some of the women already had their own businesses, but some were still thinking about establishing a business. Thus, they were at different stages in their development processes, therefore experiencing the process and its benefits differently. However, they had in common that the shrinking public funding and ongoing institutional changes in the Finnish care sectors were rocking the bases of the women's livelihoods and making their future uncertain. Also, it is characteristic of the health and care sectors that work there is very consuming and poorly paid. Therefore, participants often came to the meetings exhausted and frustrated, and conse-

quently they had no resources to discuss service development or advance their businesses, but the discussions revolved around wellbeing issues, although wellbeing issues were also discussed because some of the participants developed services for tackling these issues in the care sectors. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the group met in virtual meetings, where trust building was not easy and not at all adequate for this kind of ill-defined and emergent process. However, it is not yet clear where the process will end up.

*I have complex feelings – did I listen to the others, and did they listen to me .... It would be nice to meet people in real life.  
(Participant, Case 4)*

### 3.5. Case 5

It was challenging to get the fifth group organised, as the originator of the group was not committed to gathering the group together in the end. Now the group is still looking for a couple of new members. The members are small shop owners thinking about developing their own services. The focus is wellbeing and digitalisation, increasing the participants' digital skills and developing new digital services, because COVID-19 shrank the number of customers and the revenues in the shops. The women knew each other quite well beforehand. Therefore, difficult issues could also be discussed in a confidential, encouraging and optimistic atmosphere, even though some of the women had challenges balancing work and family. The process is still ongoing, and it is not clear where it will end up.

*When you have a start-up company you have to take steps even though it is not certain whether there is something under your step. You need to have courage and dreams and you have to think about yourself. (Participant, Case 5)*

Next, we discuss our observations based on the cases and draw conclusions based on them.

## 4. DISCUSSION OF THE CASES

In this chapter, we wanted to discuss how tailored training and coaching programmes enhance mature women's career development, lifelong learning and networking and help them to reach an appropriate work–life balance.

Originally, Case 1 was meant to be a straightforward co-development process, but it revealed that a process can be full of surprises. The themes discussed in the group went deeper than in regular day-to-day discussions between business partners. However, if the participants had not known each other beforehand, it can be assumed that the process would not have gone deep enough to reveal the hidden tensions. Finding these tension points, however, was necessary to build cooperation on a solid ground and proceed further onto the next level. Also, facilitators in these kinds of fuzzy service design processes must be aware that the process can take surprising turns, and they must have methods and tools to handle the surprises. For the training organiser, a major challenge is to find a suitable facilitator for each group. The facilitators must be knowledge experts, but more notably, they must be person experts. The most important task of the facilitator is to ask the right questions and help the group discuss and share their thoughts. Yet, the issues under discussion are decided by the group.

*The role of a facilitator is to build a safe time and place, a bubble where you can spend a moment together with unfinished issues, where they can be tested together on the verge of uncertainty.*  
(Facilitator, Case 1)

Because the participants in Case 2 did not know each other too well beforehand, the group brought them new support and cooperation networks in the highly exceptional and uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, it was also good that trust could be built in face-to-face meetings, because the group was so small that the COVID-19 restrictions did not halt the meetings. Furthermore, as the facilitator pointed out, trust helps build participants' self-esteem, which for its part increases trust.

*The group offered an extremely important mental support .... Usually the same people, who always been in your life, reinforce your current thoughts. There were brand new people here.*  
(Participant, Case 2)

Case 3 was a shared learning process on service design and a rather straightforward business case. Also, there was a joint challenge of the changing operating environment of the associations. A joint challenge is apt to make the co-development process easier. However, this case also showed that, in the process, everyone must give something of herself. The group was a bit bigger than the other groups, and maybe this affected the commitment of some of the members. Thus, as in Case 1, inadequate understanding of the joint leadership of the group was an issue in Case 3. This case also showed

that the facilitator must respect the skills of the participants and speak their language to be able to guide the service design process.

*A strong factor in team building was the joint challenge of associations, i.e., the change in the operating environment.  
(Facilitator 1, Case 3)*

The groups in Case 4 offered an important peer group for women working in the same sector, health and care, for discussing difficult issues, such as challenges of the sector, work–life balance, wellbeing at work and avoiding burnout. The process reflected, besides the participants' individuality, the sector's characteristics. This case reflects the global challenge of women, as many women work in the care sectors, but also care for their loved ones at home. These realities at work and home may entangle into a choking situation where perspectives narrow and resources are soon eaten up. In Case 4, we can see an example of this. However, the process is still ongoing, and it seems that the participants have not yet totally understood how the process works.

*A group of peers feels like a campfire where you can stop,  
learn from others and about yourself ... I am pleased about the  
differences in us and that I found soul sisters. (Participant, Case 4)*

Case 5 shows that an optimistic attitude is important in developing new services. It seems that even though some of the participants of Case 5 lived through difficult times in their personal and business lives, they still had good moods and adequate resources. If – as in this case – women have the ability to dream and see new opportunities for their businesses, for example, in digitalisation, they feel energised and want to learn new things. However, the process in Case 5 is still ongoing, and besides networking, results have not yet been seen.

To conclude, the cases in the Time4Help Finland project have been very different. This shows that the groups look like their participants. The only common denominator was that all the participants wanted to learn something new or find new meaning or change in their work and lives by making better use of their skills. Otherwise, the groups were very different. They defined their objectives and themes to be discussed. Consequently, some of the processes sailed in the shallows and some in deep waters. A facilitator just has to ask the right questions, and the participants take the process forward.

*Lecturing would not work for women who are over 45 years old.  
The group has so much expertise that it is better to let them give  
the lecture. (Facilitator, Case 2)*

There were challenges in group dynamics in many of the groups. A typical challenge was that there was a core group and an outer circle. Building

trust and commitment between participants was far more difficult in virtual meetings arranged due to COVID-19 than in face-to-face meetings. However, as one of the facilitators said, every team process is successful because every time you attend a group you learn something new about yourself; learning is a continuous project until you die.

*The more you work in teams, the better you understand ... the ideal place for you to be .... There are wellbeing challenges at work – at least partly due to incompatibility. (Facilitator, Case 4)*

## 5. CONCLUSION

Empowerment, knowledge sharing between peers and peer mentoring played a major role in all the cases in the Time4Help Finland project. Peer networks are especially important for sole entrepreneurs, whose work-related networks may be rather scarce. This is particularly important for entrepreneurs who need to cope with challenging family situations. Furthermore, service design methods were learned in the groups. The study circle approach seems to be a good approach to service design processes, in particular, as both study circles and service design are based on participatory methods. Much of the participants' feedback tells us that service design was opened to the participants in a whole new way. In addition, completely new partnerships emerged, and new services and service packages were co-created.

There were five to seven participants in our groups. In small rural towns it is challenging to gather larger groups. Furthermore, small groups are more participant centred, and that was what we sought. However, if there are five participants or fewer in a group, and if one or two are absent, the group weakens and the work begins to resemble individual sparring more than co-development. From the point of view of implementation, a group of seven participants seemed to be the most flexible and sufficiently diverse. But on the other hand, the fifth group with only three permanent members seemed to be exceptionally tight.

The effects of COVID-19 were substantial. Firstly, it was difficult to gather groups, as the situations of potential participants changed radically and rapidly. Secondly, some of the group meetings were transferred online. This had an impact on trust building and group dynamics, as well as working techniques. In terms of content, COVID-19 caused serious business challenges for the participants in all groups, although the challenges were different for different groups. Due to this, the resilience and wellbeing of participants rose to a significant role and peer support was important to all.

*This group is like a rope, which you can hold on to get forward.  
(Participant, Case 5)*

In COVID-19 times, new techniques of doing things had to be invented. The shift towards digital tools was necessary, but it was also remarkable how smoothly this happened considering the age and gender of our target group. This must be taken into account in the project results, as digitalisation is important for mature women if they want to stay involved in working life. Learning new things – even if you are compelled to do so – is always good. In some of the cases, face-to-face meetings were also possible, which was positive for trust building. In the future, training programmes will probably consist of face-to-face meetings designed to build trust, to share what was learned and to reflect on things together. These will be special moments, supported by electronic environments with materials, but also opportunities to interact.

*COVID-19 showed that no matter how well your things are, one can never know what will happen that revolutionises everything, and then you just must adapt. (Member of Time4Help steering group)*

The participants in the cases seemed to be pleased with the possibilities to co-create the contents and methods used in the training. Consequently, organisations offering training or coaching must be able to identify people's needs better in the future. Some of the participants expressed their concerns about modern working life and culture, which seems to be highly competitive and does not offer adequate opportunities for personal development, leading easily to narrowing perspectives and burnout, especially if you at the same time have to consider care responsibilities in your family.

*I would hope that this model where we can get involved already in the planning phase of the training will become more common.  
(Participant, Case 3)*

*In some working places the competition was so fierce that you wanted to hide family-related things. (Participant, Case 1)*

*When following my own children, it seems that the accelerating rhythm of work today does not allow them to study alongside work .... The language related to work has changed, and it now emphasises anxieties .... (Participant, Case 3)*

To sum up, the future of tailored training and coaching programmes built on the idea of study circles seems bright. These programmes are flexible and resonate with the current trends of lifelong learning. For mature women they

offer peer groups enhancing career development, lifelong learning and networking and help them towards a work–life balance. Peer groups develop participants' social and cooperative skills and other competences, which are increasingly valued on the labour market, at the same time valuing and building on the skills and experiences that the participants already have.

#### FURTHER MATERIAL

Microcourse: WoManager – design your career. (<https://shop.edufication.com/products/womanager-design-your-career>)

Time4Help Finland webpages. (<https://www.xamk.fi/en/research-and-development/time4help-finland/>)

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## PART C

# INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE RESEARCH



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# Chapter 7

## SANDWICH GENERATION IN THE WORKPLACE – INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

*Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and Urszula  
Zaluska*

### ABSTRACT

*The chapter discusses the assumptions and main conclusions from the international comparative research, the key purpose of which was to identify and characterise the representatives of the sandwich generation (SG) in selected European countries in relation to professional activity. The research covered five countries, and when choosing them we took into account the diversity of welfare state models. The research was carried out in the autumn of 2020 with the use of a proprietary questionnaire on representative samples of Internet users aged 45–65 from Belgium (only Flanders), Finland, Italy, Poland and Great Britain. The conducted analyses confirmed the diversification of the situation of SG representatives in specific countries.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Established to implement the *Time4Help* project financed by the European Social Fund, the partnership not only ensured the effective achievement of the planned goals but also inspired international comparative research in the field of sandwich generation (SG). The main aim of research was to identify

and characterise people from this group in selected European Union countries in relation to professional activity. Another goal was an attempt to develop, on the basis of the obtained results, recommendations for management in the context of the effective adaptation of representatives of this group in the work environment. The literature query showed only few studies describing the actual size of the SG (see [Burke & Calvano, 2017](#); [Herlofson & Brandt, 2020](#); [Vlachantoni, Evandrou, Falkingham, & Gomez-Leon, 2020](#)). Additionally, according to some authors, the probability of belonging to SG differs between countries and depends on gender ([Leopold & Skopek, 2015](#)).

For the research, we selected five European countries, and while choosing them we took into account the differentiation of welfare state regimes whose expected impact on the situation of the SG is significant. The following states appeared to be particularly interesting from the point of view of the planned analyses: Finland with a Scandinavian Social Democratic Model, Belgium with a Continental Conservative Model or the so-called the Bismarck Model, Great Britain with the Liberal Model, Italy with the Southern European Model and Poland with the Central and Eastern European Model ([Ebbinghaus, 2012](#); [Eikemo, Bambra, Joyce, & Dahl, 2008](#); [Emigh, Feliciano, O'Malley, & Cook-Martin, 2018](#); [Esping-Andersen, 1990](#)). The liberal model (e.g. Great Britain and the USA) provides citizens with social and economic protection with minimal interference on the part of the government. State aid is dedicated only to people with the lowest income, and the use of such support is associated with a lower social status. A moderate amount of social benefits is to motivate people to take up employment. Continental Conservative Model (e.g. Belgium and Germany) provides care to citizens mainly through decisions made at the local level, respecting the principle of subsidiarity. What prevails is the patriarchal model of the family and traditional gender roles, whereas the state acts as the guarantor of social rights for all citizens. Scandinavian Social Democratic Model (Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway) ensures common access to state services and benefits. It also promotes equality for all citizens, interpenetration of gender and family roles and a significant share of women in the labour market. The basic principle is egalitarianism. Southern European Model (e.g. Italy and Spain) emphasises the key role of the family in providing support to those in need. Available state support is selective – in favour of some groups at the expense of others. There is no specific minimum subsistence level and no right to achieve social well-being. Central and Eastern European Model (Poland and other post-socialist countries) was created as a result of social changes that took place in the 1990s. Its main characteristics include the partial withdrawal of the state from the provision of social services and the introduction of institutional pluralism in social security and pension funds.

For the purpose of the study two research questions were formulated:

- (1) Does the welfare state regime prevailing in a given country have a significant impact on the perception of the SG group in the workplace?
- (2) Is belonging to the SG group, including working sandwich generation (WSG), determined by demographic or professional characteristics, and is the situation of people in this group different?

## 2. DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

Computer Assisted Web Interview (CAWI)<sup>1</sup> research was carried out in the period from September to November 2020 on representative samples of Internet users in Belgium (only Flanders), Finland, Italy, Poland and Great Britain. Its main objective was to obtain data characterising people from the SG group in societies that differ in terms of the adopted models of the welfare state. The questionnaire was prepared by a Polish–Belgian–Finnish research team and included 51 questions (for different target groups). It received a positive opinion from the ethics committee of Wrocław University of Economics and Business. The research was conducted by a specialised public opinion polling company, and the average interview duration was 12 minutes.

The research was carried out on two types of samples. In each country, the basic sample included  $N=500$  participants, that is, people aged 45–65, ensuring their representativeness for features such as age, gender, education and place of residence. For better characteristics of the analysed target group we obtained the so-called boost sample with 200 people belonging to the SG group in each country. Ultimately, there were 2,522 respondents in the main sample and 833 respondents in the boost one. It is worth noting that the literature on the subject does not provide any specific definition of the SG group. Therefore, for the purpose of the research, we relied on the explanation of the SG and WSG consistent with the majority of studies addressed to these target groups (cf. e.g. [DeRigne & Ferrante, 2012](#); [Pagani & Marenzi, 2008](#); [Riley & Bowen, 2005](#); [Steiner & Fletcher, 2017](#)). By SG we meant people taking care of family members at a young (children and grandchildren), the same or old age (parents, in-laws, aunts and uncles) for more than 3 hours a week. By WSG we meant people who meet the above mentioned criteria and additionally work for more than 15 hours a week. The characteristics of the research samples due to the distinguished features are presented in [Table 1](#).

In the main sample, the share of respondents according to gender and distinguished age groups was comparable. In the case of education level,

**Table 1. Characteristics of the Main Sample and Boost Sample.**

Characteristic	Characteristic Categories	Country					Total
		Belgium	Finland	Great Britain	Italy	Poland	
Main Sample – Percentage of Respondents							
Gender	Female	48.5	50.2	49.5	52.3	50.3	50.2
	Male	51.5	49.8	50.5	47.7	49.7	49.8
Age	45–50	9.9	22.7	27.1	35.7	40.0	27.1
	51–55	12.9	23.5	19.8	26.0	26.6	21.8
	56–60	30.3	25.9	25.7	22.5	17.5	24.4
	61–65	46.9	27.9	27.3	15.8	15.9	26.8
Education level	Primary or lower	23.8	11.9	14.6	45.6	8.9	21.0
	Secondary, post-secondary	39.4	43.1	42.7	39.3	71.0	47.1
	Tertiary, academic degree	36.8	45.1	42.7	15.2	20.1	32.0
Boost Sample – Percentage of Respondents							
Gender	Female	51.8	62.0	54.2	53.8	65.1	58.5
	Male	48.2	38.0	45.8	46.3	34.9	41.5
Age	45–50	15.1	30.4	28.2	38.8	46.0	32.4
	51–55	15.7	22.2	24.9	27.5	29.8	24.2
	56–60	38.0	25.9	27.7	21.3	17.1	25.6
	61–65	31.3	21.5	19.2	12.5	7.1	17.8
Education level	Primary or lower	2.4	8.9	7.3	1.3	0.0	3.8
	Secondary, post-secondary	41.0	57.0	45.8	42.5	43.3	45.9
	Tertiary, academic degree	56.6	34.2	46.9	56.3	56.7	50.3

Source: Own elaboration.

most people had secondary/post-secondary education, followed by tertiary/academic degrees, whereas the least numerous group included people with primary or lower education. The situation differed from country to country, mainly due to the participation of representatives of different age groups and people with different education levels. In the case of the boost sample, where

the research group consisted of only SG representatives, the majority of people were women, people from the youngest distinguished age group and those with education level higher than primary.

In order to evaluate the occurrence and intensity of the SG phenomenon in the five European countries, we used descriptive statistics determined based on of the main sample. To assess the differentiation of the respondents' situations according to the selected demographic characteristics, we applied the significant difference test (Chi-square test) in the share of people with different categories of these characteristics in the answers to individual variants of questions from the questionnaire. Moreover, we applied the test of significance of mean differences (Student's *t*-test for two independent samples) in the case of characteristics with two distinguished categories and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for characteristics with more than one category. For the last method in the case of significant differences between the groups, post-hoc tests are used to interpret the detected patterns. For multiple comparisons, Tukey honestly significant difference (Tukey HSD) test was used. For all the tests carried out, the significance level of 0.05 was assumed. In order to evaluate the specificity of SG representatives, and above all the WSG against other groups, we used descriptive statistics from the boost sample and the above-mentioned significant difference tests.

### 3. OCCURRENCE AND INTENSITY OF THE SG PHENOMENON IN THE ANALYSED EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

The analysis of the main sample in the international comparative research showed that the SG group covered 12.6% of the population aged 45–65, including 15.0% women and 10.2% men. Chi-square tests indicated the existence of statistically significant differences between the representatives of both genders belonging to this group. The value of the Pearson's Chi-square test at the level of 13.386 ( $p$ -value <0.000) indicates that statistically women take care of younger, the same or older generations more frequently than men. The analysis of belonging to the SG in specific countries, both in general and in terms of gender, showed a significant differentiation of this situation and made it possible to create two groups of countries with different occurrence and intensity of this phenomenon. The first group with at least a double-digit percentage of representatives of both genders in the SG consists of Italy and Poland, whereas the second one, where this percentage is single-digit, includes Belgium, Finland and the UK. The country with the highest percentage of people identifying with the SG is Italy – as many as 24.6% of respondents

were qualified to this group, including 26.0% of women and 23.1% of men. Poland came second with an average result of 15.9%, including 20.2% of women and 11.6% of men. It is worth noting that the conducted significant difference tests proved that the number of Polish women belonging to the SG is considerably higher than men (Pearson's Chi-square test at the level of 6.886,  $p$ -value = 0.009). In the other countries, we observed a significantly lower percentage of people belonging to the SG, and in each of them the share of women exceeded that of men. In Finland, the share of people aged 45–65 in the SG was 9.3%, including 11.4% of women and 7.1% of men, in Belgium it was 7.5%, including 9.4% of women and 5.8% of men, whereas in Great Britain, it was on average 5.6%, with 7.3% of women and 4.0% of men.

An equally large differentiation across the analysed countries was observed for the results obtained for the WSG group. In total, 8.3% of respondents admitted that they belonged to the group of working people taking care of the representatives of two other generations. At the same time, it is worth emphasising that in the entire sample we did not find any major differences between the percentage of women and men in such a situation (8.5% for women and 8.1% for men). Again, the highest percentage of respondents who declared that they belonged to the SG were those from Italy – on average, it was 15.8%, including 12.1% of women and 19.8% of men. The performed significant difference tests showed a considerably higher number of Italian men belonging to the WSG group (Pearson's Chi-square test at 5.730,  $p$ -value = 0.017). In the other countries, we did not observe any statistically significant differences between the percentage of women and men belonging to this group, whereas the percentage of respondents who declared that they belonged to the WSG in Poland totalled 12.1%, including 13.8% of women and 10.4% of men, 6.3% in Finland, including 7.5% of women and 5.2% of men, 3.8% in Belgium, including 4.5% women and 3.1% men and 3.4% in Great Britain, including 4.0% of women and 2.8% of men.

We noticed an interesting situation in specific countries in relation to the level of education of people belonging to the SG group. This characteristic was considered on three levels – primary or lower, secondary or post-secondary and tertiary education (academic degree). While in the entire sample we did not find any differentiation between the share of people with different education levels in the SG group (the percentage of people with primary education was 10.4%, with secondary education – 13.6% whereas with tertiary education – 12.7%), the situation in specific countries developed differently. The country where this differentiation was the smallest turned out to be Great Britain (4.1% for primary, 6.5% for secondary and 5.1% for tertiary education). No statistically significant differences between respondents with

different levels of education were found in Belgium (4.2% for primary, 7.5% for secondary and 9.7% for tertiary) or in Poland (6.7% for primary and 16.8% for each of the two remaining ones), but they were observed in Finland (1.7% for primary, 8.7% for secondary and 11.8% for tertiary) and Italy (18.6% for primary, 26.6% for secondary and 37.7% for tertiary). The values of Pearson's Chi-square test at the level of 11.969 ( $p$ -value = 0.003) for Italy and 5.986 ( $p$ -value = 0.050) for Finland indicate statistically more frequent belonging to the SG group in these countries among people with secondary or higher education.

Even greater differentiation in terms of education was found in the WSG group. At the level of the entire sample, we found statistically significant and more frequent belonging to this group among people with secondary or higher education (4.5% for primary education, 8.7% for secondary and 10.2% for tertiary education), whereas the value of Pearson's Chi-square statistic was 13.801, which corresponds to  $p$ -value = 0.001. Statistically significant differences in this respect were also found in Belgium (Pearson's Chi-square 10.347,  $p$ -value = 0.006) and Italy (Pearson's Chi-square 33.379,  $p$ -value <0.000).

Another characteristic that was taken into account when analysing the occurrence and intensity of the phenomenon on the basis of representative groups of respondents was age. We created four categories, namely people 45–50 years old, 51–55 years old, 56–60 years old and 61–65 years old. As for the SG, for the entire sample, the highest percentage of respondents belonging to it was recorded in the youngest age group (17.7%), whereas the lowest – in the oldest one (7.1%). This situation was observed in all the analysed countries, except Great Britain, where the most numerous group was the one of 51–55-year-olds, and not the youngest one like in the entire sample and other countries. The declining share of respondents from subsequent age groups was also observed in the WSG group, where the share of the youngest respondents was 12.6%, whereas of the oldest – 1.6%. Such a result, however, is not surprising. In Poland, for example, according to applicable law, women retire at the age of 60, so their share in this group is dramatically decreasing (only 1.3% in the case of WSG for the oldest group, and 6.3% in the case of SG).

After analysing the characteristics in the main sample, we tried to answer the question about recognising the SG phenomenon in the workplace in the countries covered by the research. To this end, we analysed the answers of all professionally active respondents to the following question: *Do you have any co-workers or employees who can be classified as SG?* In the entire sample, 28.9% of respondents answered 'yes', with women doing it more frequently than men (33.9% vs 24.6%, respectively). We also observed significant



differences in specific countries, and, interestingly, much lower recognition of this phenomenon in Poland and Italy, that is, in countries with a high percentage of SG representatives. The affirmative response to the question about co-workers from the SG was given by 44.5% of the Finns (49.0% of women, 39.9% of men), 42.7% of the Belgians (50.0% of women and 35.8% of men) and 24.1% of the Britons (30.6% of women and 19.3% of men). In Poland, the total number of affirmative answers was 19.2%, and like in other countries, they were more often given by women (20.1%) than by men (18.3%). In Italy it was 18.8% for all professionally active people, 23.2% for women and 15.6% for men.

Another area of the main sample analysis was the evaluation of health and financial situation of SG representatives in comparison with people not belonging to this group. To this end, we used a question from the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) research – *To what extent have your activities, which other people normally do, been limited due to health problems in the past six months?* In this question, there were three possible answers – ‘There was a major limitation’, ‘There was a limitation but not that serious’ and ‘There was no limitation at all’. The comparison of responses given by the representatives of the SG and other research participants showed a poorer assessment of one’s health in the SG group. The Chi-square tests indicated the existence of statistically significant differences between belonging to the SG and worse state of health (the value of the Pearson Chi-square statistic at the level of 25.166,  $p$ -value <0.000). On average, major limitations were indicated by 13.0% of the respondents, including 15.1% from the SG group and 12.7% of the others. Averagely, 34.9% of the respondents indicated the occurrence of some limitations – this answer was chosen by as many as 45.9% of SG representatives, compared to 33.3% of the other participants. About 52.2% of all respondents from the main sample did not report any health limitations. However, only 39.0% of SG representatives chose this answer, compared to 54.1% of people not belonging to this group.

The respondents were also asked to evaluate their financial situation. They had three options to choose from: ‘Bad’, ‘Neither bad, nor good’ and ‘Good’. Using this question, we strived to assess the financial situation of SG representatives both against the entire sample as well as professionally active people. About 35.3% of the respondents evaluated their financial situation as good, including 32.4% from the SG group and 35.7% of the remaining respondents. Interestingly, a lower percentage of people from the SG than the mean in the analysed group also described their financial situation as bad (on average, 21.2%, compared to 17.6% for SG representatives). The greatest

differentiation was observed in the ‘neither bad, nor good’ option, where as many as half of SG representatives described their situation in this manner, with the average for the entire sample at the level of 43.5%. Interesting results were also obtained when comparing only professionally active people belonging and not belonging to the SG group. In the case of evaluating one’s financial situation as bad, practically no differentiation was noted – all professionally active respondents as well as SG representatives and people not belonging to this group indicated this variant of the answer in 15.0% of cases. However, some differences were noted when both groups were assessing their financial situation as ‘good’ – on average, this answer was chosen by 40.7% of professionally active people, including only 32.5% from the SG and 42.1% of the other respondents. The conducted Chi-square tests showed the existence of statistically significant differences between belonging to the WSG and a poorer assessment of one’s financial situation compared to other professionally active people (Pearson Chi-square statistic at the level of 7.866,  $p$ -value = 0.020).

The visualisation for the analysed questions is presented in [Fig. 1](#).

#### 4. WSG IN TERMS OF DEMOGRAPHIC AND PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

In order to create an in-depth profile of the SG group, we additionally relied on the data from the boost sample that consisted of the respondents from the countries covered by the research meeting the criteria described for the SG group, with particular attention to the WSG group. Thus, the general sample, including the main ( $N=2,522$ ) and the boost sample ( $N= 833$ ), had a total of  $N=3,355$  respondents. Of them, 1,151 people (34.4%) belonged to the SG (including the respondents meeting the criteria from the main sample), including 784 who belonged to the WSG group (23.4% of the full sample, 67.9% of the SG). It is worth noting that the indicated targeted sample did not meet the requirements of representativeness and, therefore, we do not recommend drawing conclusions for the population based on the analysis. Nevertheless, a significant increase in the size of the SG group, and especially the WSG, allowed us to conduct additional analyses based on characteristics such as gender or country of origin, which, due to the limited number of respondents meeting the criteria of the target group in the main sample, was difficult to carry out. The purpose of the in-depth analyses was primarily to characterise the situation of the SG in the labour market, as well as to evaluate the differentiation of the nature of care provided due to the demographic and professional characteristics of the respondents.



Source: Own elaboration.

**Fig. 1. SG – Differentiation of the Situation.**

Firstly, we analysed the structure of the research samples due to the situation of respondents in the labour market, but we did not find any significant differences between the structure of the main and the general sample. In the main sample, 58.3% of the respondents were professionally active – 76.6% of them stated they worked full-time, whereas 23.4% – part-time. In the general

sample, 62.3% of the respondents were professionally active, and the share of those working full-time was 76.1%. Next, we compared the respondents from the general sample belonging and not belonging to the SG in terms of the situation in the labour market, and discovered significantly higher professional activity in the SG group. As many as 72.7% of respondents belonging to the SG indicated that they were employed, compared to 56.5% of professionally active people not belonging to the SG (see [Table 2](#)). At this point, it is worth pointing out that the percentage of people belonging to the SG who are self-employed is higher than among respondents who do not belong to this group (8.9% and 6.1%, respectively). As far as of full-time and part-time employment is concerned, we did not find any differences between the two analysed groups. In both of them, about 76% of the respondents claimed they worked full-time. We also compared professionally active people belonging and not belonging to the SG, but again we did not observe any significant differences in terms of the nature of employment. There were 88.8% of employees in the SG group and 90.0% in the group of other professionally active people, 11.2% of self-employed working in the SG group, and 10.0% in the group of other professionally active people.

In the subsequent part of the research, we considered the situation in the labour market of women and men who belong to the WSG. In this group, on average, 72.6% of people declared full-time employment – among women it was 66.0%, whereas among men it was 80.1%. On average, 16.2% of the respondents from this group declared part-time employment, with significantly more women (24.5%) than men (6.8%). Male respondents also much more often indicated self-employed working full-time or part-time (13.1%), compared to 9.5% of women, with the average being 11.2% (see [Table 2](#)).

Significant differences between women and men from the WSG were observed in terms of working time. On average, 71.7% of female respondents indicated full-time work, whereas 28.3% – part-time. On the other hand, the percentage of men working full-time was as high as 91.3%, with only 8.7% working part-time. Very interesting information was provided by the analysis of working time according to gender in specific countries covered by the research. Considering the situation of women it can be stated that in Poland it looks significantly different as only 14.1% of female WSG representatives work part-time, which is a half less than indicated for the entire sample. On the other hand, in Belgium 50.0% of women from the WSG group stated they worked part-time, and 41.5% in Great Britain. In the group of men, a very low percentage of respondents from the WSG working part-time was recorded in Finland (4%), compared to 12.1% in Belgium or 11.0% in Italy (see [Table 2](#)).

**Table 2. The Status of the SG Group in the Labour Market (% of Respondents).****The Situation in the Labour Market – People from the SG Versus Other People**

SG	Full-time Employee	Part-time Employee	Self-employed Full-time	Self-employed Part-time	Not Employed
Yes	49.5	14.3	5.6	3.3	27.3
No	39.0	11.4	4.1	2.0	43.5

**The Situation of People from the WSG Group in the Labour Market – Gender**

Gender	Full-time Employee	Part-time Employee	Self-employed Full-time	Self-employed Part-time
Female	66.0	24.5	5.7	3.8
Male	80.1	6.8	11.2	1.9
Total	72.6	16.2	8.2	2.9

**The Situation of People from the WSG Group in the Labour Market – Country and Gender**

Country	Full Time Work		Part Time Work	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Belgium	50.0	87.9	50.0	12.1
Finland	75.9	96.0	24.1	4.0
Great Britain	58.5	91.4	41.5	8.6
Italy	63.0	89.0	37.0	11.0
Poland	85.9	92.5	14.1	7.5
Total	71.7	91.3	28.3	8.7

**Feeling the Need to Change the Amount of Working Time in the WSG Group**

Gender	I Would Like to Work Less	I Would Like to Work Longer	I Would Devote as Much Time to Work as I Do Now
Female	46.9	7.1	46.0
Male	39.8	11.8	48.4
Total	43.6	9.3	47.1

Source: Own elaboration.

We also analysed the answers to the question about the average weekly working time in the WSG group. In the entire WSG sample, the average number of working hours per week was 37.49, with 34.93 hours for women and 40.44 hours for men. People working the longest hours appeared to be the Poles with 39.34, followed by the Finnish (39.13 hours). The British spent the least time at work – 35.05 hours per week.

The average weekly involvement in looking after people from two generations is 19.6 hours for the entire SG sample, while for the WSG group it is 18.88 hours and for the non-working SG group it is 19.77 hours. From the point of view of gender, women are much more burdened with providing such care (on average, 20.43 hours a week, including 19.47 hours for the WSG and 21.99 hours for the non-working SG) than men (on average, 17.36 hours a week, including 18.21 hours for the WSG and 14.57 hours for the non-working SG). When comparing different countries, it seems that in Poland the respondents from the SG are burdened the most (on average, 22.40 hours a week, including 23.13 hours for women and 21.05 hours for men). Great Britain took the second place with 22.26 hours per week, followed by Italy (19.4 hours), Belgium (15.26 hours) and Finland (14.74 hours).

Another set of questions addressed to SG representatives concerned the structure of time dedicated to the younger and older generation they take care of. In the entire sample, the respondents indicated that they devoted, on average, 51.8% of their time to the younger generation (children and grandchildren), with no greater differentiation in terms of the respondents' country of origin observed. The highest percentage share was observed in Poland (54.0%), whereas the lowest – in Great Britain (48.7%). While analysing the involvement in taking care of the younger generation by people from the age groups indicated in the previous point, it is worth noting that younger people are much more burdened with providing such care (45–50 years old, approx. 56.3%) than older ones (56–60 and 61–65 years old).

Next, all professionally active respondents were asked whether they would like to change the number of working hours. To the question: *If I had the opportunity to change the amount of time I usually devote to work during the week, at the same rate per hour ...* there were three possible answers: 'I would like to work less', 'I would like to work longer' and 'I would devote as much time to work as I do now'. The distribution of answers was respectively 42.1%, 8.8% and 49.1%. Interestingly, in the WSG group we could observe a greater share of both those who wanted to work less (43.6%) and those who wanted to work longer (9.3%). Considering the answers to this question only for the WSG group, but broken down by gender, it can be stated that women more often strive to work less (46.9%) than men (39.9%). Only 7.1% of women from the WSG group expressed willingness to increase the number of working hours compared to 11.8% of men (see [Table 2](#)).

Analysing the answers given by the SG in terms of different characteristics, we also asked about the place of residence of the older generation whom they take care of. There were four possible options, namely: 'We live together', 'We live in the same town', 'We live in different places, but within the distance of 50 km' and 'We live in different places, more than 50 km away'. For the entire

SG group, the distribution of the answers was the following: 18%, 51%, 23% and 8%, respectively. It is worth noting that no significant differences were observed between the WSG and non-working SG representatives. Slightly more people from the WSG live in the same household (18.2% compared to 16.6% for the non-working SG) or live in the same town (52.3% compared to 47.7% for the non-working SG). The analysis of the situation in specific countries showed significant differences, though. As many as 26.8% of Polish and 25.4% of Italian respondents indicated that they shared a household with the person staying under their care. On the other hand, only 3.4% of Finnish and 10.7% of Belgian respondents selected this answer. Additionally, in Poland 57.5% of respondents indicated that they lived in the same town as the person they took care of. In Finland, 25.4% of respondents stated that the person they took care of lived in a place more than 50 km away (with only 2.1% Polish respondents choosing this answer). We asked the same question about a person from the younger generation which the SG took care of, and the distribution of answers looked in the following way: 44.3%, 34.1%, 14.7% and 6.9%. In this case, it was possible to observe much larger differences between the WSG group and non-working people from the SG group. For example, 50.5% of respondents from the WSG group stated they shared a household with the person they took care of, compared to 31.1% for people from the non-working SG group. Taking into account the country, the highest percentage of respondents living in the same household was observed in Italy (54.6%) and Poland (51.2%), whereas the lowest in Finland (29.8%). On the other hand, as many as 20.0% of respondents from Finland stated that they lived in a town more than 50 km away from the place of residence of the person of younger generation they took care of (compared to 2.9% in Belgium and 3.3% in Poland).

Another area of the analyses was the nature of the care provided. As far as elderly people who SG representatives looked after were concerned, we specified the types of activities performed as part of this care and their intensity. The respondents were asked to perform an evaluation using a 1–6 scale, where 1 meant ‘never’ and 6 – ‘very often’. The activities included in the research were the following: help in the household (e.g. shopping, cleaning, etc.), support in medical procedures and rehabilitation (e.g. visiting a doctor together, arranging formalities related to obtaining medical or rehabilitation services), support in maintaining personal hygiene, financial support and other forms of help. According to the answers obtained, SG representatives most often help older family members with activities related to the household and support in the area of medical care and rehabilitation. This finding distinguishes this group from carers of the elderly whose activities focus mainly on helping in

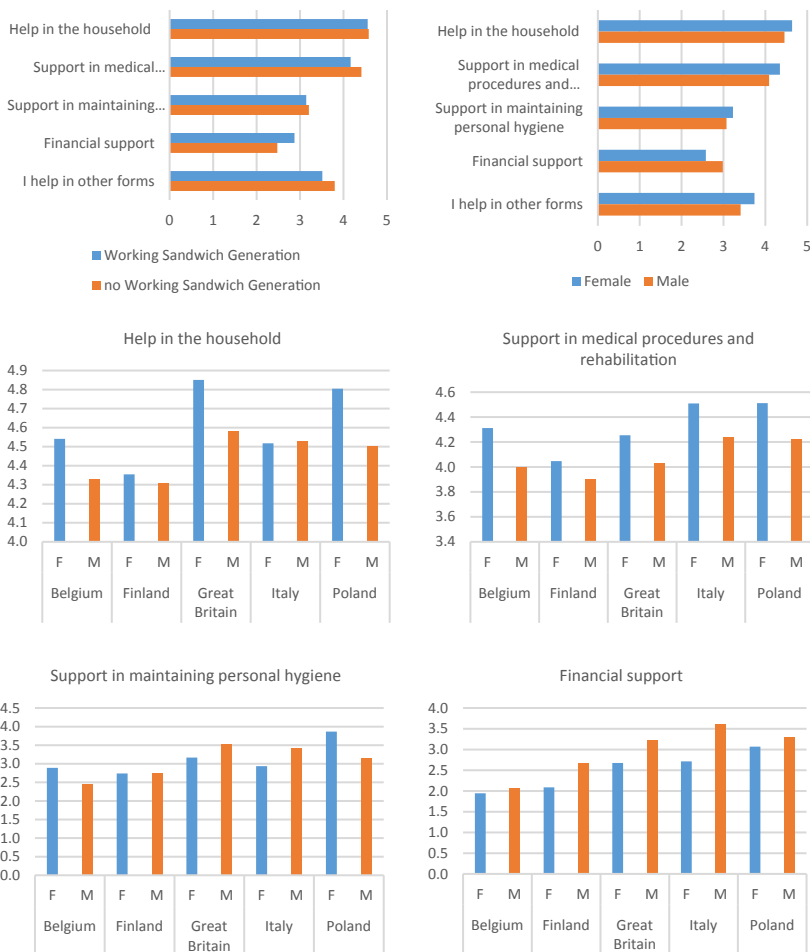
the household. While conducting the research, we also paid attention to the intensity of help according to characteristics such as employment, gender and country of origin of people providing care. As far as statistical significance is concerned, non-working people from the SG are more involved in support in medical procedures and rehabilitation ( $p$ -value for  $t$ -statistic at the level of 0.001) and other forms of help ( $p$ -value for  $t$ -statistic at 0.01) than those who are professionally active. However, they provide financial support to the older generation less frequently ( $p$ -value for the  $t$ -statistic below 0.000). Women more often than men perform household chores, ensure support in medical procedures and rehabilitation, and other forms of help. However, compared to men, they less often support elderly family members financially. In the case of the analysis of the differences in the intensity of care provided by the SG to their elderly family members by country, statistically significant differences were found for all forms of care included in the research. For example, helping with household chores is significantly more intensive in Poland and Great Britain than in Finland. Assistance in the medical and rehabilitation area, on the other hand, is characterised by significantly greater intensity in Poland and Italy rather than in Finland. Taking into account the assistance in maintaining personal hygiene, three groups of countries can be distinguished – Belgium and Finland, where the share of this type of care is relatively low, Poland and Great Britain with a relatively high intensity of this type of support and Italy with a moderate level compared to the other countries. Financial support for the older generation is significantly more common in Italy, Poland and Great Britain rather than in Belgium and Finland. In the ‘other forms of help’ category, the respondents specified the type of assistance provided. The most frequently mentioned forms included spending time together, talking, going for walks together, visiting places of culture (e.g. theatre, opera, and cinema) or financial consulting.

The visualisation of the answers obtained for the forms of care for the older generation is presented in [Fig. 2](#) (mean of indications).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Referring directly to the research questions presented in the introduction, it should be stated that the analyses carried out on international data allowed us to obtain affirmative answers in both cases. The observed differentiation of the situation of SG representatives in the five countries covered by the research confirmed the influence of the welfare state regime prevailing in a given country on the perception of this group in the workplace. On the other hand,





Source: Own elaboration.

**Fig. 2. Forms of Care Provided by SG Representatives to the Older Generation.**

visible differences in the occurrence and intensity of the SG phenomenon in terms of demographic or professional characteristics showed the dependence of belonging to this group on the analysed features, and confirmed the strong differentiation of the situation of its representatives.

Taking into account the occurrence and intensity of the SG phenomenon in terms of the situation in the countries covered by the research, it is worth pointing out two distinguished groups of countries that differ strongly in

the level of its occurrence. The first group includes Italy and Poland, that is, countries with Southern European and Central and Eastern European welfare state regimes, while Belgium, Great Britain and Finland, that is, countries with the Continental Conservative, Liberal and Social Democratic regimes, belong to the second group. The different intensity of the SG phenomenon, ranging from 25% in Italy and 16% in Poland to 8–9% in Belgium or Finland and about 6% in Great Britain, indicates stronger level of involvement of middle-aged individuals in looking after people from two generations in the countries where the importance of family ties and defined gender and family roles are highlighted. On the other hand, it is worth noting a reverse dependency when it comes to recognising this phenomenon in the workplace. The presented results prove that in the 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. On average, in the entire sample, 29% of professionally active respondents answered the question about co-workers or employees from the SG group in an affirmative way. In Poland or Italy, the average result was 19%, whereas in Finland and Belgium 44% and 43%, respectively. The reason for such results, apart from the current family model in Poland and Italy, and even ‘natural commitment to care’ expected especially of women, might be the sense of fear or shame preventing people from raising such topics in the workplace. It is also worth emphasising that the identified differences may result from both different welfare state regimes and the diversity of cultural dimensions in the analysed countries (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). However, this area of research requires a considerably deeper insight.

Interesting observations were also made when analysing the participants of the SG group, and especially the WSG, in terms of the distinguished characteristics. On the one hand, participation in the SG from the point of view of education of the respondents in the representative sample indicated that people with secondary or tertiary education belong to this group much more frequently. On the other hand, an increase in the occurrence and intensity of the SG phenomenon in subsequent age groups and the most numerous youngest clusters may indicate the effects of ageing in populations and the growing need for support as well as for a more numerous group of this type of carers. The need for support is proved by the worse health situation of SG representatives, especially a very low percentage of people who do not experience any discomfort, as well as the worse financial situation of the WSG compared to other professionally active people.

What should be the subject of special concern and systemic solutions is the support for women from the SG group whose situation is much worse

than that of men. This is proved by the level of intensity of this phenomenon, which in all countries covered by the research showed differences at the level of several percentage points to the disadvantage of women, but above all the level of involvement in looking after the older and younger generation and the perceptible level of fatigue. It is also worth noting the greater involvement of women in all forms of care for the older generation, except for financial support. An interesting observation concerns the differences found in the intensity of part-time work performed by women in specific countries, and especially a low percentage of Polish women from the SG group working in this employment system. This should be the subject of further research, as the high level of engagement in looking after others and full-time work lead to fatigue, deterioration of health and, consequently, increasing problems of carers.

#### NOTE

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**PART D**

CONCLUSION

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## Chapter 8

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*Mervi Rajahonka, Dorota Kwiatkowska-  
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and Kajja Villman*

#### 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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