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## Circus plate spinners: The intersection of work and family life for working sandwich generation mothers in academia

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**ABSTRACT.** Sandwich generations (Miller, 1981) have long been established in the extant literature as people who care for young children while simultaneously providing support to aging parents. Contemporary patterns have given way to a new group that not only balances caring for younger and older family members, but they do so alongside employment obligations. Burke (2017) deems this new group the working sandwich generation. Even though more American families have become increasingly dependent on women's salaries (Glynn, 2016), modern-day women continue to manage the lion's share of familial caregiving duties even when these women work outside of the home and earn comparable salaries to men (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Complexifying this situation is the realization that many women navigate these demands in the absence of robust family-friendly policies in the workplace. Using experiential knowledge and the extant literature, and grounded in feminist theory and social exchange theory, this project reflects on the complexities among contemporary working women who are caring for young children and dying parents. Given the broader scope of American demography, the authors anticipate that the experiences shared here may resonate with many others and will hopefully work toward informing workplace culture and policies in ways that support women's successes.

*Keywords:* working mothers, sandwich generation, feminist theory, social exchange theory, academic mothers

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### **Circus Plate Spinners: The Intersection of Work and Family Life for Working Sandwich Generation Mothers in Academia**

Imagine a circus plate spinner. You likely envision a performer intensely focused on keeping multiple plates atop wobbly poles that are all spinning at different speeds, requiring them to frantically run back and forth and provide differing levels of momentum to maintain their balance, or else they crash to the ground. This metaphor best captures the elusive work-life balance for contemporary working sandwich generation mothers who struggle to meet the needs of young children and aging parents while embarking on the busiest, and arguably most important, time in an academic's career. This paper was born from two young women in the throes of relentless working sandwich generation feats, navigating the demanding tasks of upward mobility in a historically male-dominated profession, while also caring for young children and dying parents, all in the absence of robust family-friendly policies. First, a discussion of the emergence of the working sandwich generation is provided, followed by contemporary work-life balance patterns. We then share the lived experiences of working sandwich generation mothers, followed by a policy discussion impacting the intersection between work and family life. Executive orders issued early in 2025 ended widespread telework for federal employees, making discussions surrounding workplace demands and family life obligations especially relevant and timely.

During the early 1980's, research emerged calling attention to women who were navigating the high demands of parenting children while also caring for aging parents and referred to this group as the sandwich generation (Miller, 1981). Since this time, larger societal-level shifts have changed family life, whereby more American families have become increasingly dependent on women's earnings outside the home (Glynn, 2016). These trends have led to the emergence of a new, more contemporary group of individuals called the working sandwich generation (Burke, 2017). This group is unique from the traditional sandwich generation as they are also charged with balancing workplace demands alongside those of parenting and caring for aging parents. Modern-day women are often tasked with balancing the requirements of multiple major social roles within dated employment systems ill-equipped to support their needs and ultimate success in balancing the intersection of work and family life (Zorotovich et al., 2021).

Work-life balance has always been challenging to achieve, but for modern-day working sandwich generation mothers, the complexities of reaching a true balance may not even be feasible. As such, the literature has evolved to provide distinctions between work-life balance and work-life conflict (Padmanabhan & Kumar, 2016). Even though fathers today take on more household and child-related tasks than generations before them, women still manage the lion's share of the duties even when these women work outside of the home and earn comparable salaries (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Similar trends have also emerged regarding gender disparities in the care of older family members (Airey et al., 2008; Almeida et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2022; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Work-life balance and work-life conflict were introduced in earlier decades and align with the traditional model of fully separating work and family life, which is not indicative of contemporary workers' experiences, especially working sandwich generation women. Williams and colleagues (2016) explored "the hidden psychological infrastructure that cements the mismatch between today's workplace and today's workers" (pg. 515) embedded within the work devotion schema, which points out that uninterrupted commitment to work functions as a marker of status and legitimacy that works to reinforce certain status and gender identities. Recent trends have begun to involve work-life integration, which emphasizes a broader understanding of the ways in which personal and professional responsibilities can be managed in a more fluid manner rather than being in stark contrast and competition with one another. Considering the rise in asynchronous work made possible by advanced technology, such fluidity may not always be

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voluntary or desired considering the increased risks of constant availability that may further erode work-life boundaries. For the purposes of the current manuscript, work-life integration acknowledges the bidirectional and influential nature between work and family life and more appropriately represents the complex intricacies of this intersection. We acknowledge that this paper describes the experiences of two white-collar class women working in higher education, which is known for a lack of boundaries between work and family life in both physical space and time, and therefore, we believe the term work-life integration is appropriate.

The purpose of this paper is to share experiential knowledge among two working sandwich generation mothers to highlight the difficulty in managing the upward ranks of a demanding career during major life changes and doing so in the absence of robust family-friendly policies and to offer key points and policy-relevant recommendations for educators and institutions that better support work-life demands without placing additional invisible labor on the very women such recommendations are intended to benefit. At the time of this writing, each author was a mother to three young children and was also tasked with navigating end-of-life parental care. One author faced the death of her father, whose decline spanned eleven days, and the other cared for her mother, whose end-of-life needs spanned several weeks. Both authors dedicated additional time during the weeks following parental loss to aid in end-of-life business matters and help the surviving parent settle into a changed home environment. For each author, this event marked the first experience with the loss of an immediate family member. In terms of workplace context, each author maintained leadership positions within academia and was embarking on the challenging and demanding tasks of promotion and tenure in the absence of family-friendly policies. Consistent with similar models in academia across the United States, bereavement leave available to each author consisted of a mere two days, followed by the option to utilize sick leave. If all sick leave days were exhausted, then unpaid family medical leave was the next option. For working mothers with young children, using all of one's sick leave balance can be dangerous should additional needs for absences arise to care for children. Lastly, unpaid leave is rarely ideal or even feasible for many individuals and their families. We share our lived experiences to offer examples of the challenges faced by some working sandwich generation mothers who struggle to navigate competing and incompatible demands of work and family life.

Feminist theory provides a structured lens for examining the experiences of working sandwich generation mothers by highlighting the interplay between the gendered organization in many modern-day workplace settings and the caregiving demands and expectations within family life. Central to feminist perspectives is the understanding that gender is socially constructed, historically situated, and embedded within systems of power that shape individuals' access to resources, opportunities, and well-being (Smith & Harmon, 2017). Working sandwich generation mothers, as discussed in this manuscript, represent the clash between traditional gender roles and the realities of contemporary life. Applying this framework illuminates how persistent gender norms surrounding caregiving and professional commitment collide with women's participation in demanding careers, particularly within institutions historically designed within patriarchal values.

Historically, caregiving tasks for both children and aging parents have largely been relegated to women, reinforcing the notion that such caregiving is inherently a woman's familial responsibility (Scott, 2018). This pattern perpetuates gender inequalities and complicates women's career trajectories within male-dominated fields such as academia. Although women's participation in paid labor has substantially increased over recent decades, these shifts have not been accompanied by corresponding transformations in the workplace. The absence of family-friendly policies exacerbates the challenges

faced by contemporary working sandwich generation mothers, drawing attention to the ways in which these traditionally gendered expectations hinder women's professional advancement.

Feminist theory also offers a framework to understand the uneven distribution of caregiving demands within families. Although men now contribute more time to childrearing than in previous generations, women continue to perform a disproportionate share of dependent care (Parker & Livingston, 2016). These gendered patterns become even more pronounced when considering the intersection of paid employment and eldercare responsibilities, as is the case for working sandwich generation mothers. These structural conditions shape women's professional identities and constrain long-term career advancement, particularly during life stages marked by intensified family care responsibilities.

The complexities of keeping metaphorical plates spinning on their poles for working sandwich generation mothers are deeply compounded by dated standards of success (Slaughter, 2012; Zorotovich et al., 2021), still present traditional gender roles (Smith & Harmon, 2017), role strain (Walsh et al., 2017), and the romanticized view of overworking and consequent frowning upon taking time away from work for personal life maintenance (Iyer, 2022). Although conversations surrounding the benefit of more robust family-friendly workplace policies are increasing, there remains a lack of widespread adequate support for working sandwich generation mothers (Fuller & Raman, 2019).

Family-friendly workplace policies can benefit both working sandwich generation mothers and employers. Workers with increased flexibility in their work schedules and location have less burnout, as well as a reduction in both perceived and psychological stress (Yucel & Fan, 2023). Often, working sandwich generation mothers fear that they will miss out on promotions due to missing work to care for others. However, Wagner (2024) found that in a supportive organizational environment, flexible working arrangements can actually have a positive influence on the likelihood of promotion of women in the workplace. Company policies that reduce gaps in gender equality, such as those that increase the compatibility of family and work, see a reduction in stereotyping, discrimination, and gendered pay discrepancies, resulting in greater career advancement for women (Wagner, 2024).

In addition, the lack of family-friendly policies can cost organizations billions of dollars each year through increased absenteeism, decreased productivity when employees are dominated by worry over a loved one or the need to make arrangements for them during working hours due to a lack of alternative options (Fuller & Raman, 2019). If workers must quit their jobs to care for loved ones, it is detrimental to the company in terms of lost institutional memory, expertise, and experience. Having a family-friendly workplace can benefit organizations through workers having increased company loyalty, motivation, retention, increased productivity, and the overall feeling that the company is a more attractive place to work (Bourhis & Mekkaoui, 2010). The benefits of supporting caregivers in the workplace are well-documented for both organizations and workers. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, we highlight policy-related recommendations for educators and institutions that may broaden family-friendly resources within the workplace.

## Family-Friendly Policy Recommendations

### Distinguishing between Different Types of Care

A few suggestions on useful resources to support those who navigate the care of young children alongside that of aging parents surround policies that distinguish between differing types of care for family members. Workplaces that differentiate leave policies to care for younger dependents from eldercare support a more holistic and contemporary model of family leave needs. Larger societal shifts in American demography have resulted in aging population trends, wherein the Baby Boom Generation, the largest cohort in American history, is currently entering later adulthood (Caplan, 2023). As such, multigenerational families will continue to be tasked with balancing care alongside traditional family demands. Much like the care of young children defaulting primarily to women, eldercare also disproportionately defaults to women (Almeida et al., 2020). These trends have persisted over time (Airey et al., 2008) and have even worsened in more recent years (Pereira et al., 2022; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Working sandwich generation women who oversee child and eldercare tasks often do so at the potential expense to their own upward career mobility and opportunities (Burke, 2017; Kotsadam, 2011). Policies recognizing the different demands in caring for children and aging family members will grow in demand as working sandwich generation mothers continue to strive for workplace success and family well-being.

### Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible working arrangements (FWA) give employees the opportunity to determine their working hours and their location (Urukovicova & Roskova, 2024). Oftentimes, these require the employee to work a set number of hours, but at times of their choosing. Likewise, employers can allow workers to choose their location for some of their work and require them to be in the office at other times. FWA strikes an interesting balance by offering employee-controlled elements of work within employer-set parameters. Such a policy can drastically minimize the number of days off a working sandwich generation woman needs to document while enhancing overall satisfaction and workplace success. In addition, FWA can also decrease presenteeism, which is when an employee is physically present at work, but they are focused on other concerns, such as caregiving responsibilities (O'Sullivan, 2014).

Workplace policies that offer FWAs are designed to accommodate diverse needs and have the potential to alleviate some of the issues of work-life balance and conflict present in the lives of contemporary working sandwich generation mothers. These policies can also be implemented in numerous ways, making them an ideal starting point for conversations on improving workplace well-being and creating an environment conducive to success and satisfaction for contemporary workers. Research has demonstrated that more control bestowed on employees to manage their schedules has led to increased performance outcomes and productivity (Giovanis, 2018) and that adequate support and flexibility maximize workers' ability to manage both caregiving and workplace tasks more efficiently (Trukeschiitz et al., 2012). Employment sectors that have realized these gains include the tech, data processing, and publishing industries, as well as financial, professional, and scientific services (Mployer, 2025). Below, we outline common FWAs and describe the benefits to both the employee and the employer.

#### *Flexible Work Arrangements by Schedules*

**Staggered Hours.** In a staggered hours FWA, employees work approximately eight hours a day as they would traditionally, but they have greater flexibility to care for others because they may start

working earlier or later than standard work hours. For example, a worker may be required to work a set number of hours per day (e.g., 8 hours), but may be allowed to start work anytime between 7 a.m. and 10 a.m. and finish between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. This arrangement allows workers to schedule doctor appointments early or late in the day, manage school drop-off and pick-up times, and handle other personal responsibilities.

**Compressed Work Week.** Compressed work weeks give employees greater flexibility in their workdays by allowing them to choose to work longer days in exchange for a full or half day off, freeing up large chunks of time for personal errands or appointments. The benefits of this arrangement, for companies and workers alike, are that employees are still able to work the standard amount of 40 hours each week, maintaining productivity. Julien et al. (2011) found that workers with a compressed workweek had greater ability to balance work and life demands. An additional benefit for companies is that if multiple workers are utilizing compressed weeks and alternating the days that they take off, it could reduce utility costs or overhead for office spaces because the full workforce is not present at any given time.

**Core Hours.** “Core hours” is a policy where employees must be present during a set of “core” hours (e.g., 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.) but can adjust the rest of their schedule as needed (OPM). This FWA works well in careers that require team collaboration and/or client interaction. Workers can be present to work with others during specific hours while achieving flexibility outside of those times. The benefits of this FWA are that it guarantees team coordination and communication during key hours, balances flexibility with the need for real-time collaboration, and minimizes the potential for delays in decision-making.

### ***Flexible Work Arrangements by Location***

**Telecommuting and Remote Work.** According to Marzullo (2019), telecommuting is an FWA in which employees are allowed work from away from the office on some days and are required to go into the office on other days, typically on a regularly recurring schedule, while remote work is when employees work away from the office at all times (i.e. workers are not required to come into the office at any time). Telecommuting workers must live within a reasonable commuting distance to the office, while remote workers may live far away from the office location. Both FWAs allow workers the flexibility of not having a commute (at least some of the time). Both allow for greater flexibility in where an employee lives, allowing them to live closer to aging parents and closer to schools or resources that aging parents or children may need. FWAs by location can enhance work-life balance while still maintaining office presence and team dynamics on other days.

### ***Other Flexible Work Arrangements***

**Job sharing.** In this FWA, the duties of a full-time position are divided among two or more employees (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Each employee works part-time hours, and together they fulfill the requirements of one full-time job. This arrangement works well for employees who only want part-time hours or need to balance work with other commitments, such as family caregiving, education, or health issues.

**Part-time work with benefits.** Under this arrangement, employees work less than 40 hours a week, or less than full-time, but they still receive benefits, such as health insurance, retirement contributions, and paid time off (Herrity, 2025). Part-time work schedules can vary widely, from 20 to 30 hours per week. These types of jobs can be difficult to find, but they can be essential for workers who need reduced hours to care for aging parents and children, and still rely on benefits.

**Results-only work environment.** In a result-only work environment (ROWE), employees are evaluated based on the results they produce rather than the hours they work (Galea et al., 2014). This policy allows for maximum flexibility in when and where the employee works, as long as goals are met and deadlines are honored. This FWA benefits sandwich generation workers with unpredictable caregiving responsibilities who are at a disadvantage with other FWAs, such as compressed work week or telecommuting, that require more regular schedules even though workers are afforded flexibility (Spann et al, 2020). This type of FWA can be a catalyst in changing organizational culture from basing performance on hours worked to meeting performance objectives in support of workers' flexibility (Julien et al, 2011).

## Workplace Culture

### Organizational Culture

In addition to implementing family-friendly policies, workplaces must shift their organizational culture to recognize that employees have obligations outside of work, so that employees feel secure in utilizing the support in place (Julien et. al., 2011). Organizational culture, a firm's unique system of values, beliefs, and assumptions held by its members, is critical to employee well-being, as it influences day-to-day operations such as communication patterns and decision-making processes, as well as the level of employee engagement and satisfaction (Rafi et al., 2025). Instilling a workplace culture conducive to employees being able to comfortably seek leave time for family care has a positive impact on workers' physical and mental health (Yucel & Fan, 2023). Furthermore, caregivers need to feel secure in being fully away from the office to focus on caregiving duties, and confident that their attention to these matters will not adversely affect their chances for promotion.

From a group dynamics perspective, norms surrounding availability, productivity, and commitment are socially reinforced within organizational culture. As a result, employees who conform to ideal worker expectations are rewarded, while others, such as those with caregiving responsibilities, are marginalized (Gençer, 2019). Research demonstrates that mothers face both subtle and overt penalties in overwork-oriented cultures, including diminished mentoring access (Shin & Kim, 2022), heightened exposure to workplace incivility (Miner et al., 2014), and long-term career consequences associated with flexibility stigma (Stone & Hernandez, 2013). An intersectional lens further highlights that these penalties are not uniformly distributed; caregiving mothers' experiences vary depending on race, class, occupational status, and access to supportive networks (Fielding-Singh et al., 2024; Hicks et al., 2022)

Drawing on feminist theory, these norms reflect the gendered organization of work, as caregiving continues to be implicitly constructed as incompatible with dedication to one's career (Smith & Harmon, 2017). For working sandwich generation mothers, the expectation that their role as a caregiver should remain invisible in the workplace intensifies role strain and psychological distress, even when family-supportive policies nominally exist (Yucel & Fan, 2023). The persistence of overwork culture further reinforces these inequities. As noted by Iyer (2022), the glorification of overworking is strong within many American workplace cultures, and Americans often feel guilty when utilizing time off. This sentiment is most strongly felt by working mothers, who already contend with cultural assumptions questioning their professional commitment. In fact, the "work demand schema" (Williams et al., 2016, p. 515) emphasizes a culture wherein individuals who are truly dedicated to their careers will prioritize work above all else, including family obligations that could potentially interfere with workplace demands.

Some jurisdictions (e.g., San Francisco, Canada) have enacted policies that allow employees the right to request flexible work options without the threat of retaliation (Grory, 2024). The problem, however, is that employers are not always required to grant the accommodations. Social exchange theory provides insight into how these cultural expectations are enacted at the interpersonal level (Homans, 1961). Spann et al. (2020) found that FWAs were often individual arrangements between workers and their immediate supervisors, who acted like gatekeepers, granting a worker a favor to which the worker felt indebted. If the supervisor moved on or the worker switched departments, the worker had to renegotiate their FWA. As a result, some companies created carer's passports that the worker carried with them as they moved positions throughout the company (Spann et al., 2020). These group dynamics illustrate how caregiving support is contingent on employee/supervisor relationships rather than genuine organization-wide commitment.

Furthermore, there must be robust support at every level throughout the company, from senior management down to the immediate supervisors for workers utilizing FWAs. One way to ensure uniform support through the ranks is to provide training on how to recognize the negative impact of work-life conflict, to provide reasonable steps on how supervisors can support their employees' requests for more flexibility in balancing work and family needs, and to realize the positive impact of a supportive organizational culture (Julien et al., 2011). Workers realize supervisors must have trust in them to complete their work out of sight (Galea, 2014). Organizations can have trainings for workers and supervisors on best practices for building trust, such as enhanced communication, small check-ins before big deadlines, etc. in addition, organizations need to gather feedback from their employees on their policies through listening sessions and/or surveys, review and be willing to revise their policies as the needs of their employees change (Galea et al., 2014).

Additional steps that organizations can take to promote a culture of supporting care-giving needs are accounting for family commitments such as school schedules, evening and morning routines when scheduling appointments and meetings; putting plans in place for short-term emergency coverage of caregivers' roles; and managers actively demonstrating a balance between work and family commitments (Wagner, 2024). Organizations that offer support groups and education through resource libraries, lunch-and-learns, and include eldercare in employee health fairs publicly acknowledge that many employees have these dual roles, thereby normalizing the situation (O'Sullivan, 2014). Additionally, organizational leaders can act as role models by using the firm's caregiver resources, taking time off to care for their family members, and talking openly about their own journey as caregivers. To firmly establish organizational change, it is essential that organizations align their behavior with their policies and rhetoric. When employees perceive that their employer displays corporate hypocrisy, a belief that firms do not actually possess the virtuous characteristics they profess, their trust in the firm decreases and they are more likely to consider leaving the firm (Goswami & Bhaduri, 2021).

### **Practical Implications**

While we do not want to create additional work for individuals in similar circumstances, we do want to offer concrete points that may be easily relayed to employers and colleagues. First, educators can identify colleagues with whom they feel comfortable talking about their caregiving responsibilities. Starting the conversation about caregiving within the organization is the first step in creating a supportive work environment (Vos et al., 2025). Next, as educators grow their leadership and assume positions of power (e.g., faculty senate president, program director/coordinator, department chair, dean, etc.), they can make it a priority to implement family-friendly policies such as the ones outlined in this paper and prioritize organizational culture change. In addition, we advise educators to understand that

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their students may be members of the sandwich generation and to review their course policies to eliminate barriers to success for this group of students.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the metaphor of the circus plate spinner captures the precarious balance that working sandwich generation mothers must navigate as they strive to fulfill the demands of their professional lives, caregiving for young children, and supporting aging parents. This paper has illuminated how societal and workplace expectations have created a unique set of challenges that complicate work-life balance for mothers in academia. The evidence shared reflects that contemporary working mothers face intensified pressures from both their roles at home and their careers, in environments often lacking sufficient family-friendly policies. The need for family-friendly workplace policies is timely and critical. Such policies not only acknowledge the intersection of work and family life but also support working mothers in their pursuit of upward mobility within their careers. As demonstrated, robust family-friendly workplace practices are beneficial not only for working sandwich generation mothers but also for employers, who can reap rewards in terms of employee productivity, retention, and overall organizational health. Therefore, it is imperative for policymakers, educational institutions, and organizations to reform workplace policies and cultures, ensuring that they not only accommodate the complexities of modern caregiving and work demands but also empower working sandwich generation women to thrive both professionally and personally.

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