

# **Employed “Sandwich” Generation Women: Coping with Work/ Family Conflicts**

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## **Abstract**

The study investigated the multiple role stress sandwich generation female employees experience both at home and at the workplace and how they cope with such stress. A total of one hundred and forty seven (147) sandwich generation women participated in the study. Results showed that sandwich generation women that receive care giving supports either from their husbands or from house-helpers experience less stress than their counterparts without such care giving supports,  $X^2 = 21.58$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ; sandwich generation women who cared for the sick aged parents experience more stress than their counterparts who care for healthy aged parents  $X^2 = 14.71$ ,  $P < 0.05$ . Sandwich generation female employees who provide care giving services to large families did not differ from their counterparts in the normal family size on measures of multiple role stress.

## **Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

In contemporary African society, the number of sandwich generation female employees is on the increase. Sandwich generation female employees are middle age working- class women whose children are still young (0-12 years) and are living with their aged parents or parents-in-law under the same roof. This segment of the Nigerian population is caught between the cross-role demands of their aged parents, their own young children and work behaviour expectations. Miller (1981) calls them women of sandwich generation. They are likely to suffer a great deal of stress arising from the multiple roles they perform as wife, mother, worker and elder care-giver. As demands to fulfil these multiple roles increase, women put in on the average, 20 to 40 extra hours of work per week in what would otherwise be rest and leisure time (Goldschmidt-Clermont, 1982).

Similarly, Smyke (1991) estimates that women, on the average, work one to three hours per day longer than men in the society, whatever the number of hours men put in. Lending credence to the claims of earlier researchers, Howard (1992) opines that more women than men hold multiplicity of roles, while Gigliotti (1999) asserts that this segment of women is prone to stress and burnout. Perceived multiple role stress is generated when meeting demands of one role interferes with the meeting demands of another role (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, & Snoek, 1964). Since working mothers are the occupants of many roles, such as family responsibilities and work behaviour expectations, they could experience multiple role stress (Thoits, 1987); while Maclean, Glynn, and Ansara (2004) assert that if these women are unrelieved of some of these roles, they may experience role strain.

Reviewing literature on the type of stress women encounter as they perform multiple roles, Doress-Worters (1994) revealed that young adult women have incorporated elder care into their already multiple roles. She, therefore, calls for researches on this inter-generational relationship in order to identify stress coping strategies of the two parties involved in such inter-generational relationship (the care-givers and care-receivers). Doress-Worters' opinion supported earlier suggestion by Epstein (1987) that women's multiple role stress is a complex problem that will not be understood until conditions under which it develops or managed are investigated. Even at that, literature on the

nature, levels of stress and coping strategies of women who perform added elder care to their existing roles is very sparse. Where it exists, the extent to which sandwich generation female elites cope with stress arising from their performance of triple roles is missing.

However, many theories have been advanced to explain the multiple roles women experience in discharging their duties as homemakers and career women but the two relevant theories in the present study are the role accumulation and role conflict. The reason for that is because the thrust of the paper is on the type and nature of stress employed sandwich generation women experience as homemakers, care-givers and occupants of formal organizational roles in their world of work, which role accumulation theory is concerned about. Secondly, sandwich generation female elites perform conflicting roles, which the role conflict theory stands to explain.

Role accumulation theory suggests that the more roles a person occupies, the better his/her health status will be (Good, 1960). According to this view, if women increase their roles by going out to work, they gain more privileges, rewards and resources, as well as increased self-esteem and sense of purpose. The theory points to the fact that women's performance of multiple roles of wife, mother, worker and, perhaps, caring for the elders, do not lead to stress. Supporting Good's theory, Sieber (1974) suggests that multiple role occupancy represents a net gain in social integration, status and identity for the individual and therefore regards multiple roles as normal conditions of life in a complex society in which everyone occupies more than one role. Though Goods and Sieber recognized the potential benefits to women of holding multiple roles, they overlooked the other half of the equation: most men in Africa do not share familial nurturance and care-giving services with women since they (men) still hold on to the stereotypical belief that nurturance role is women's natural function. The theory failed to do justice to the typical dilemmas Nigerian women are facing in balancing multiple roles.

On the other hand, role conflict theory posits that the health of working women may suffer if they try to combine the roles of wife, parent, and worker and possibly elder care. This could be explained by the fact that each person has limited time and energy. Advancing his view, Miller (1981) calls our attention to the unequal division of labour in family-based care giving responsibilities and provides an important reminder that the traditional expectations requiring women to be the care providers in families are still in practice in some societies, which aptly captures the prevailing care-giving practices in Nigeria.

Research on the effect of multiple roles on the well-being of women has focused largely on the roles of young adult women, such as employment, marriage, and child bearing and has paid insufficient attention to how they cope with stress of added elder care role (Doress-Worters, 1999). In Nigeria, elder care is becoming an increasing common role for women. Many women today care for both children and elders simultaneously. Older Women's League (OWL, 1989) reported that women who care for an elder parent may provide such care for more years than they spend rearing children. Further support for the growing number of aged requiring assistance is suggested by a longitudinal study which showed an increasing likelihood of women assuming the elder care role both as they age across birth cohorts (Manton, Corder & Stallard, 1993). This suggests that responsibilities for the care of elder parents do not wait until children have left home. Women, who care for both children and the elderly, are the most likely to be challenged segment of a population from the standpoint of balancing personal needs and responsibilities for others. Women's multiple involvement in other roles coupled with the added elder care role maybe potent factors affecting women's psychological well-being. The type of stress these care-givers experience and the way and manner these women who experience increased demands for the care of elders and their young children cope with stress remain to be fully explained. That is the thrust of this research.

Research results on women and their multiple roles show that multiple roles affect women's psychological well-being (Barnet & Baruch, 1985; McLanahan & Adams, 1987) but when employment and parenting roles are considered separately, employment role is most likely to enhance women's well-being. If having parental responsibilities increases symptoms of psychological distress, what

becomes the fate of women employed in formal organizations and who are saddled with elder care responsibilities?

Multiple role occupancy may result to stress. Studying how women, who perform multiple roles in the home and place of work, appraise and cope with stress, cannot be overemphasized. Coping encompasses cognitive and behavioural strategies employed by sandwich generation women to manage stress of work/family interface (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Individuals adopt either maladaptive or an adaptive coping method to reduce stress arising from home, workplace, and their daily encounters with stressful situation. One major factor that reduces individual's vulnerability to stress is social support – one's network of social and family ties (Beehr, 1992). On the contrary, a person who is alone physically or psychologically, that is, physically or emotionally, alienated from others, is more likely to be vulnerable to stress than someone who has strong social relationships (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Pilisuk, Bylan & Acredolo, 1987). Lending credence to the role of social supports in buffering stress, Carey (2002) states:

It is no news that stress can make you sick. But recent research says the solution is not working less or playing more. It is having someone to confide in (p.184).

Whether social support works as a stress buffer or stress terminator, the information exchange with the units of social support (family, friends, husbands, and church) may inspire positive coping or it may have a irregularity effect on coping (Leavy, 1983). Schultz and Saklofske (1993) reported that quantity of support is not as important as quality of support. This is based on evidence that people with extensive, but low-quality, support report feeling lonely more often than people with less, but high-quality support (Rice, 1998). According to Schumaker and Hill (1991), women generally have a more limited network than men, but it is also more intimate and intensive. Compared with women, men typically have more extensive support network, but the support tends to be more superficial (Yablin, 1986); while women generally have several friends outside the marital unit whom they confide in during crises (Shapiro, 1983).

Social support has stress buffering property, especially when the stressor comes from having to care for young and/old family members with a chronic illness or some other limiting conditions (Shapiro, 1983). Kirkham, Schilling, Norelius and Schinke (1986) reported that social support provides caregivers the opportunity of exchanging information with their friends on the stress of care-giving roles. This reduces their feelings of emotional turmoil that goes with being a caregiver.

Other coping strategies which people under stress may adopt include substance abuse (Ebie & Tongue 1988; Abosedo & Edoho, 1993; Ahmed, 1989; Ugwu, 2009), cognitive restructuring (Rice, 1998; Folkman, Chesney, Pollak & Phillips, 1992) and time management (Marsh, 1988). However, coping strategies adopted by people under stress may depend on a number of factors: the individual's lack of understanding of effective way of managing the situation; his earlier successful approach; his skills; and his perception of the way out.

Most of the researches conducted in the area of multiple role stress were carried out in developed countries and there was no work done in this area with a Nigerian sample. If employed women in the contemporary Nigerian world of work have been found to experience a great deal of stress (Ifelunni, 1993 ; Ugwu, 1998; Ifeagwazi, 2005; & Ugwu, In-press), much desired to be explored about employed sandwich generation female elites, especially as they are squeezed by the care-giving demands of two extreme generations. Furthermore, despite the growing number of female employees in the Nigerian workforce, elder care role has not been considered a devastating stressor to women. This is because elder care is perceived to be a natural role of women in African society. This constitutes a barrier to the understanding of the plight of women. This study intends to fill these gaps. In addition, since the extended family-based social supports are rapidly phasing out, there is the need to investigate the type of stress women are facing and how they are managing it.

Furthermore, studies carried out by Doress-Worters (1994) and Pierret (2006) define sandwich generation women in terms of women whose parents are still alive and need assistance and whose children are between the age-range of 0-21 years. The above classificatory criteria are fraught with

error in the Nigerian context because (1) the people in the West have fewer siblings with whom to share the burden of elder care in contrast with the large family size in Nigerian culture, (2) children in Nigeria who are 12 years and above lend significant support to their parents on family-based responsibilities and will most likely reduce the added elder care responsibility of their mother. Hence, the focuses on the employed female elites whose children are below 12 years.

### **Aims and Objectives of the Study**

This study aims at exploring, understanding and analyzing multiple role stress of sandwich generation female employees in Nigeria. The main objective of this study is to investigate the extent to which sandwich generation female employees in Nigeria experience stress as home makers and career women. In addition, the following specific objectives will be to:

1. investigate the type of stress sandwich generation female employees experience in their lives;
2. identify whether they have systems/ individuals that contribute to their management of stress;
3. determine the role of the family size in the creation or reduction of stress on the sandwich generation female employees;
4. determine how the health status of the aged parents will increase or decrease stress of the sandwich generation female employees;
5. identify the coping strategies they adopt in the management of multiple role stress; and
6. determine whether there are other coping strategies which they believe are useful but are not accessible to them.

### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses guided this study.

1. Sandwich female elites who are provided with care- giving supports from individual around them will not experience stress more than those without such supports.
2. Sandwich generation women who care for the sick aged parents will not experience stress more than their counterparts who care for the healthy parents.
3. Large family size will not increase stress of sandwich generation female elites.

### **Methods**

In this chapter, the researcher is concerned with the plan of action that has been fulfilled, which includes research design, the sample that was studied and its characteristics; the instruments used for data collection, the procedure used to gather information and the statistics used for data analysis.

### **Research Design**

The study used a cross-sectional survey design throughout the period of data collection. The researcher also collected data on the type of stress sandwich generation women encounter and the coping strategies they adopt to counter stress. In doing so, no data were manipulated. Rather, data were collected in line with the responses provided by sandwich generation women in the questionnaire. The area of the study is Nsukka town--Nigeria, which is the seat of the first Nigerian indigenous university. The area was chosen because of the prohibitive bride price that is prevalent in that culture. Furthermore, the women of the area have been found to aspire to higher education, which leaves many of them unmarried until at a very mature age. Women of this area are also very concerned about marriage, to the extent that, irrespective of their age, they would want to be ultimately married.

## **Participants**

The sample for this study consisted of one hundred and forty-seven (147) sandwich generation women who possess the following characteristics: (1) they are employed outside home; (2) their children's ages range from 0-11 years; and (3) are living with their aged parent(s) under the same roof.

Out of one hundred and forty-seven (147) sandwich generation women sampled for the study, 98 of them are performing people-oriented jobs (nursing, teaching and counseling), while 49 of them are performing non-people oriented jobs (other jobs). Similarly, forty-one (41) of the participants had already obtained post-graduate degree; sixty-nine (69) had their Bachelor of Degree or its equivalent, while thirty-seven (37) of the participants had National Certificate of Education or its equivalent. Their age range is between 28 years to 50 years. Twenty-six of the women fall within the age bracket of 28-30 years, while one hundred and twenty one of them are within the age range of 34-50 years. Ninety-six of the women provide care giving services to large families, while fifty-one of them provide care services to normal family size. Among the women studied, ninety-three of them care for the sick aged parents while fifty-four of them care for 'healthy' aged parents.

## **Instrument**

The instrument used for data collection was a 13-item Sandwich Generation Female Elites Stress and Coping (SGFESC) questionnaire, which was developed by the researcher. The instrument was designed to measure the type of stress sandwich generation women experience and their coping strategies. The questionnaire was divided into three sections, namely: A, B and C. The section A contains information about the demographic variables of place of work, level of education, and age of the respondents, while section B is concerned about the nature and type of stress sandwich female elites encounter in discharging their duties in the work/family domains. Typical questions in the type of stress sandwich generation women experience are: 'I feel overloaded with work both at home and in the office; 'I face conflicting demands from work and family roles' and 'My duties at home and at work are not well-defined because each day brings in new roles'. Respondents were required to state whether they 'Agree' or 'Disagree'. *A split-half reliability coefficient of 0.81 was obtained using the 5-item questionnaire on 43 sandwich generation female employees of Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Nigeria. The reliability index meets the standard of 0.70 as recommended by Kline (1993).* Section C of the questionnaire measures the coping strategies adopted by sandwich generation women to counter multiple role stress. In order to ensure that the instrument is valid and reliable, both face and construct validities were established by subjecting the items to scrutiny by experts.

## **Procedure**

The researcher employed snowball sampling technique (Green, Tull, & Abraham, 1995) and purposive sampling method to track down the participants. Because there is no readily available list of employed sandwich females in Nigeria, the researcher identified one employed sandwich generation women who suggested places or offices where other sandwich women could be reached. With that procedure, a total of one hundred and fifty-six (156) copies of the questionnaire were distributed in hospitals, primary and secondary schools, and in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka work settings. In the hospital settings, thirty-one (31) copies were distributed and collected back, forty-nine (49) copies were distributed in secondary schools but forty-six were returned, while twenty-one (21) copies were distributed in primary schools and the same number was returned. All in all, ninety-eight (98) copies were returned from the three settings mentioned above. In the University work environment, fifty-five (55) copies were distributed, while forty-nine (49) copies were returned. Each work setting where the questionnaire was distributed had a collection center for the filled questionnaire.

In order to elicit frank responses, the respondents were requested not to write their names on the questionnaire. The respondents were also requested to fill the questionnaire at their leisure time, which they dropped at the designated collection center within their work environment.

## **Data Analysis**

Frequencies and percentages were used to analyze most of the data. A chi-square was also used to test the influence of number of children, husband's support and the health status of the aged parent(s) on women's experience of multiple role stress.

## **Results**

### **Social and Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

#### **Education**

The majority of sandwich generation women in the study have high level of education. Over 74.83% of the women have obtained at least first degree while only 25% of them have ordinary diploma as their highest educational qualification. The variable (education) appears to have a significant impact on women's early marriage because of the long time invested in training. This, perhaps, explains why many sandwich generation women have aged parents that need assistance while their own children are still young.

#### **Age Structure**

The majority of sandwich generation women involved in the study (82.31%) were aged between 34 and 50 years. This indicates that sandwich generation women who care for the aged parent(s) and/or parent(s)-in-law fall within this age bracket.

#### **Households Composition**

The average number of children per sandwich generation women in the study was five, while the average number of children plus aged parent(s) and/or parent(s)-in-law was eight. Forty-six percent (46.30%) of the sandwich generation women hired the services of house-helps while over fifty-three percent (53.7%) of them provide direct hands-on-care, that is, without the assistance of house-helps.

Regarding the number of sandwich generation women that provide care giving services to different family units, over thirty-four percent (34.7%) of sand them provide care services in families with total household of between one (1) and six (6) people ("normal family size") while over sixty-five percent (65.3%) of the women care for families with total households of between seven and above (7 and above) – "heavy family size".

#### **Hands-on-care Supports**

A large proportion of respondents reported that they receive assistance from people (55.2%), while over forty percent (44.8%) of the respondents reported that they do not receive any assistance from anybody in the performance of domestic chores. When the respondents were asked to mention the person(s) that provide such assistance to them, majority of the respondents (83.95%) reported that such assistance comes from their house-helps, while only sixteen percent (16.05%) identified their husbands as providing such assistance. This suggests that sandwich generation women are not given enough of hands-on-care support from their husbands. Perhaps that explains why many of them hire the services of house-helps (maids) who assist in the performance of domestic chores. The respondents were also requested to rate the level of supports they receive from people. Out of 68 respondents that receive supports from their house-helps, twenty-seven of them, which represents 39.71%, evaluated house-helps' assistance as 'fairly satisfactory, while forty-one (60.29%) of them said the assistance was "unsatisfactory".

Of the 13 respondents that identified their husband as the only source of support, ten (10) (76.92%) of the respondents evaluated the level of assistance as "satisfactory" while the remaining three (23.08%) rated the level of assistance as "very satisfactorily". This suggests that women who receive assistance from their husbands appear to appreciate such assistance very highly, while those

women whose assistance comes from the house-helpers perceive such assistance as a normal call for duty since they pay for such services.

Ninety-three respondents (63.27%) reported that the aged parents staying with them are suffering from one form of severe illness or the other, while fifty-four respondents (36.73%) indicated that their aged parents are not suffering from any severe illness.

### **Stress at Home**

**Table I:** Ten types of stress sandwich generation female elites encounter at home.

S/N	Types of Stress Encountered	Total Number of Respondents who Mentioned each item	Ranking of each item stress
1	Financial constraints	147 (100%)	1 <sup>st</sup>
2	Waking up early in the morning and preparing breakfast and getting children ready for school	141 (95.92%)	2 <sup>nd</sup>
3	Having overloaded work	136 (92.52%)	3 <sup>rd</sup>
4	Children/husband/aged parent conflicting role demands	131 (89.12%)	4 <sup>th</sup>
5	Cleaning the home environment including messy toilets	121 (82.31%)	5 <sup>th</sup>
6	Uncomplimentary remarks from the aged	103 (70.07%)	6 <sup>th</sup>
7	Preparing food different from the normal meals of the family	98 (66.67%)	7 <sup>th</sup>
8	Children's and aged parents' illness	97 (65.99%)	8 <sup>th</sup>
9	Accommodation problem/crowded nature of the house.	89 (60.54%)	9 <sup>th</sup>
10	Children's/aged people's misbehavior	78 (53.06%)	10 <sup>th</sup>

Table I above shows that all the sandwich generation women identified financial stress as one major problem confronting them in the discharge of their care giving services. The majority of the respondents (95.92%) identified “waking up early and preparing children to school” as the second major stress facing them at home. ‘Having overloaded work’ and ‘conflicting demands from children/aged parents/husband’ were placed third and fourth respectively. Majority of the respondents (92.52%) identified ‘work overload’ as one of the sources of stress in the home, while ‘conflicting role demands’ (89.12%) came closely behind as a source of stress to the sandwich generation women. A large proportions of respondents (82.31%) also identified ‘cleaning the home environment’, especially the messy toilets as one source of stress to them. ‘Uncomplimentary remarks from the aged’ (70.07%) and ‘preparing different diet for the sick aged’ (66.67%) were also identified as major sources of stress by the sandwich generation women. ‘Children’s illness and/or aged parents’ illness’ (65.99%) were reported as one of the stressful situations facing sandwich generation women. ‘Overcrowding’ (60.54%) and ‘tight schedule’ (53.06%) were the least reported by the sandwich generation women as causing stress in their life as homemakers.

### **Stress at the Workplace**

**Table II:** Difficulties/Stress sandwich women encounter in their workplace

S/N	Types of stress	Number of times each item was mentioned	Rank
1	Time management	141 (95.92%)	1 <sup>st</sup>
2	Work overload	139 (94.56%)	2 <sup>nd</sup>
3	Work schedules conflicting with family roles	131 (89.12%)	3 <sup>rd</sup>
4	Poor conditions of service	131 (89.12%)	3 <sup>rd</sup>
5	Intra-role conflict	128 (87.07%)	5 <sup>th</sup>
6	Problem of coordination	123 (83.67%)	6 <sup>th</sup>
7	Number and nature of clients	106 (72.11%)	7 <sup>th</sup>
8	Duration of work tasks	102 (69.39%)	8 <sup>th</sup>
9	Responsibility (for people and things)	98 (66.67%)	9 <sup>th</sup>

Table II above shows that (95.92%) of the sandwich generation female elites reported that time management was one problem/stress they encounter in their workplace. Other work stress reported by female sandwich generation women include work overload (94.56%); conflicting work schedules (89.12%); poor conditions of service (89.12%); inter-role conflict (87.07%); problem of coordination (83.67%); and the number and the nature of clients (72.11%). Duration of work tasks (69.39%) and responsibility for people and things (66.67%) were the last two in the table, which sandwich generation women reported as sources of stress in their workplace.

### Role Overload

**Table III:** Belief that they are overloaded with work

Sandwich generation women	(Agree) overloaded	(Disagree) not overloaded	Chi-square $X^2$
Receive support from others	41 (60.29%)	27 (39.71%)	21.58*
No support	73 (92.41%)	6 (7.59%)	
Large family size	86 (89.58%)	10 (10.42%)	3.37
Normal family size	40 (78.43%)	11 (21.57%)	
Caring for the sick aged parents	87 (93.55%)	6 (6.45%)	14.71*
Caring for healthy aged parents	39 (72.22%)	15 (27.78%)	
Employees of people-oriented	71 (72.45%)	27 (27.55%)	2.52
Employees of others	30 (61.22%)	19 (38.78%)	

\*  $p < 0.05$  (significant)

Table III above shows that over sixty percent of the sandwich female elites who receive supports from either their husbands or house-helpers reported that they are overloaded with work, while over ninety per cent of them who do not receive any support at all from anybody reported that they are overloaded. The result also shows that there was significant difference between sandwich women who receive supports and those who are not supported by anybody in the discharge of their duties, ( $X^2 = 21.58$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Sandwich generation women who do not receive assistance from anybody reported more work overload than their counterparts who receive supports either from their husbands or house-helpers. This suggests that lending help in care ameliorates stress sandwich generation women experience in discharging domestic duties.

Regarding family size, sandwich women who provide care giving services to large families reported more work overload (89.58%) than their counterparts in normal family size (78.43%), although they did not differ significantly ( $X^2 = 3.37$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ). This suggests that sandwich women who provide care services to ‘heavy families’ experience almost the same level of work overload as their counterparts in ‘normal family size’.

Sandwich generation women who care for the sick aged parents experience more work overload than their counterparts who care for the ‘healthy’ aged parents, ( $X^2 = 14.71$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Over ninety per cent (93.55%) of the sandwich women who care for the sick aged parent(s) reported more work overload compared with over seventy per cent (72.22%) of the sandwich women that care for ‘healthy’ aged parents. Although more sandwich women working in people-oriented organizations reported more overload (72.45%) than their counterparts in non-people oriented work organizations (61.22%), they did not differ significantly, ( $X^2 = 2.52$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ).

### Conflicting Role Demands

When sandwich generation women were asked whether they face conflicting demands from work and family roles, all the respondents, irrespective of the conditions under which they provide care giving services, agreed that they experience role conflict.

### Role Clarity

All the respondents agree that their duties at home and workplace are well- defined. This suggests that they know their daily routine both at home and at the workplace.

### **Coping Strategies**

Regarding coping strategies adopted by the sandwich generation women, ‘relaxation’ was mentioned most frequently (92.8%); this was followed by ‘discussing problems associated with care giving with a support group’ (89.81%), that is, keeping a confidante whom you talk to with complete candor. ‘Meditation’ (84.59%) and ‘role management’ (83.11%) were also identified by the respondents as other ways of coping with stress associated with care giving. ‘Time management’, which is, allocating time for each role (80.09%) and ‘problem focused coping’ (80.06%) were also prominent in their reporting. Other coping strategies identified by female elites are ‘dialogue’ (60.01%), ‘learned helplessness’ (46.81%) and maintaining a ‘positive outlook on life’ (46.72%).

When sandwich generation women were asked whether there are other ways of coping with stress other than those they had mentioned, which they could recommend for other women performing multiple roles, ‘assertiveness’, that is, learning to say no and limiting one’s self to problems one can solve, was mentioned regularly.

## **Discussion**

### **Social and Demographic Characteristics of Sandwich Generation Women**

The study investigated how sandwich generation women cope with multiple role stress in Nigeria. Overall, results showed that majority of the sandwich generation women who participated in this study are middle-aged women that provide care -giving services to heavy family sizes. The result showed that the average family size of the nuclear family of the sandwich generation women is five in number, the spouses inclusive. However, results also revealed that the family composition changes when aged parent(s) or parent(s)-in-law joins their own adult children, which in average increases the number to eight. This suggests that most African families are “heavy families”. This result supports earlier assertion by Uzoka (1995) that African concept of family is without doubt extended, in contrast to the widely orchestrated notion of the nuclear family of father-mother-offspring of the Western peoples.

### **Hands-On-Care Supports**

Results also reveal that many of the sandwich generation women receive supports either from their husbands or house-helps. However, results show that a negligible number of husbands lend support to the women’s care giving services at home. This suggests that majority of Nigerian men still perceive nurturing role as women’s natural role. Although very few husbands provide care giving supports to their wives at home, their services were reported by their wives as satisfactory. This could be explained by the fact that men who agree to support their wives in domestic chores put in their best. This may contrast the services provided by the house-helps, many of whom are hired and paid for the work, which the sandwich women perceive their services as instrumental tasks. Alternatively, sandwich women may have compared the house-helps services vis-à-vis their salary, which they may assume as not being congruent with their pay. This may affect their evaluation of the services house-helps provide to them and could explain why many sandwich women reported that the services of the house-helps are fairly satisfactory. On the contrary, since many traditional African cultures ascribe nurturing roles to women, the little help these women receive from their husbands may be over -valued and this may influence the positive evaluation of their husbands’ services.

### **Stress at Home**

When the sandwich generation women were requested to list ten stress properties that are associated with their care giving services at home, financial constraints was given prominence. This result is consistent with earlier findings by Pierret (2006) and Maclean et al (2004), which identified financial

pressure as one stress facing sandwich generation women. This could be explained by the fact that the incorporation of elders into the already existing nuclear family requires additional financial commitment. This is aggravated by the fact that Nigerian government does not have social security for the aged and many, of the retired aged, are not paid their pension and gratuity for upwards of two years. This situation leaves the financial burden of the aged to lie on the shoulders of their adult children. Furthermore, the high inflationary trends that characterize many African countries, Nigeria inclusive, increase the financial pressure of the sandwich generation women, whose monthly wages cannot even cater for the needs of their nuclear family. It is most likely that the incorporation of the elderly into the existing nuclear family structure with their attendant needs may have exacerbated the adult children's financial constraints.

'Performing early morning domestic chores' and 'having overloaded work' were also identified as a major stress facing sandwich women. One of the sandwich women said, "I wake up very early in the morning everyday and go to bed very late; sometimes twelve midnight (12:00am) and sometimes close to (1:00am) the next day", "when shall it end?" This excerpt suggests that many of the sandwich women suffer from "sleep debt". This situation is capable of impacting negatively on their health. The multiple roles these women perform and how these roles conflict with one another is evident from the responses obtained from the sandwich women. This may emanate from the fact that sandwich women are caught in the cross-fire demands as they juggle the needs of their children, elderly parents and high performance expectations in their workplace.

Other important stressful factors identified by sandwich women are: cleaning the home environment; preparing meals for the elderly, which differs from the family's normal meal; uncomplimentary remarks from the aged; children's illness and aged parent's illness; accommodation problem; and inability to coordinate the varied activities of the day-to-day domestic responsibilities. The problem of keeping the home environment clean is stressful, especially if one lives in a crowded home environment. This may be more stressful particularly when the sandwich women are faced with the problem of cleaning the old people's mess.

Furthermore, many of the sandwich women in the study are caring for the aged with one form of degenerative disease or the other. Such degenerative disease includes reduced hearing; blindness or visual impairment; hypertension and reduced ability to get around because of arthritis. This situation makes the care of the elderly very difficult since the nutritional requirements of older persons are not necessarily the same as those for younger people, and the dietary needs of the well older persons are often not appropriate for the chronically ill older persons. This may lead the sandwich women to prepare two different meals – one for the old parent(s) who may be required to eat less starchy food and another for the young children who need balanced diet for growth and energy. Besides, the ill-health of the elderly also requires frequent hospital visits and its attendant hospital bills, which deplete the family's financial budget and creates 'financial stress' to the women (the "managers" of home resources).

### **Stress at the Workplace**

Sandwich women identified many undesirable tasks that they encounter in their workplace environments, which range from time management, through work overload to problem of the coordination of many conflicting activities. Time management is one aspect of stress facing sandwich women. This results from the fact that sandwich women have crowded schedule, which requires good time management skills. Conflicting work/family roles was also identified as one major stress facing them. This may be explained by the fact that their job may demand their physical presence at certain hours during the day while family responsibilities demand their attention and sometimes physical presence all the time. In their workplace, sandwich women maybe performing invisible role of planning the next day's activities even when engrossed in the highly formalized and routine demand of the world of work. Conversely, the conflict may result particularly when they are physically attending to family responsibilities at home while mentally focusing on work-related issues.

Other negative aspects of their work environment include intra-role conflict, number and nature of the clients, and poor conditions of service. The employed sandwich women face the problem of work overload as most organizations under study were understaffed. Perhaps it is this lowered staff/recipients ratio that explains why many of the respondents complained of the number of clients they have to attend to. Their perceived poor conditions of service may also be indirectly linked to perceived differentials between rewards (pay, fringe benefits) and inputs (work overload).

### **Role Overload**

Many of the sandwich women who reported that they are overloaded with work and family roles are those who receive no supports from either the house-helpers or their husbands. This result rejects the first hypothesis which states that sandwich women who are provided with care giving supports from individuals around them will not experience stress more than those without such supports. This finding supports earlier research results (e.g. Cohen & Wills, 1985; Bylan & Acredolo, 1987), but it contradicts the findings of Schuttz and Saklofska (1993) and Schumaker and Hill (1991), which showed that social supports per se do not buffer stress. A possible explanation of this finding is that assistance from husbands may provide invisible energy that facilitates performance. In addition, it gives room for the division of labour in the house since lending supports in care giving services reduces the chances of the individual being overburdened with the job.

Sandwich women who provide care giving services to large families also reported more work overload than their counterparts in normal family size. Large family size could be a source of stress especially when the dependency ratios, that is, the number of less active adults (e.g. aged parents) and children, are high. The higher the number of dependent adults and children the higher the burden of the active members in meeting the cost of minimum family nutrition would be and, the more crowded and dirtier the home environments. This, perhaps, explains why many of the sandwich women who provide care giving services to the large families reported more work overload than their counterparts in normal family size.

Significant difference was also found between sandwich women who care for the sick aged parents and those who care for the healthy aged parents on role overload. Comparatively, sandwich women who care for sick aged parents reported more role overload. This result corroborates earlier finding by Remennick (1999) who reported that the most challenged care givers are those that care for the sick elderly. One major reason could be that such care givers make regular visits to hospitals with their sick elderly in order to obtain health services. Such condition does not only deplete the financial purse of the family, which may create financial stress to the care givers ('managers' of home resources), but creates the problem of time management as hospital visits may conflict with the prescribed work role. Furthermore, the incapacitated elderly ones, depending on the severity of the illness, need more intensive care giving involvement.

There was no significant difference between employees whose jobs are related to the care giving services provided by sandwich generation women in the home (people-oriented) and those whose nature of job in the workplace is at variance with the ones they provide at home. However, the nurses and teachers sampled in this study reported slightly higher work overload than other employees whose work roles contradict the family care giving roles. This result contradicts the findings of Hochschild (1983) who reported that workers who have direct responsibility for the fate of others seem to suffer more stress than those concerned only with the manipulation of inanimate objects.

### **Conflicting Role Demands**

As reported by the respondents in the study, all the sandwich generation women, irrespective of the health status of the elderly and the family size, reported that they experience role conflict from the care giving and work role demands. This finding supports Staines' (1980) spill-over theory, which emphasizes permeability of work-home boundaries. The dual function of the sandwich women exposes them to two sets of conflicting demands. Most of the time, their jobs in the workplace require their

physical presence at certain hours during the day, while family responsibilities demand their attention and sometimes physical presence ‘all the twenty four hours of a day’. This could be explained by the fact that sandwich women perform some “invisible roles” since they may be engrossed in either family roles or work roles while mentally planning for the next day’s activities. This is more pronounced in the new technological age. For instance, it is common practice for the sandwich women to be attending to the care giving demands of the home, where they are physically located, while mentally focusing on work-related issues as work follows them on a cell-phone, pager, or modem. Perhaps, it is telecommuting that may have exacerbated the conflicts sandwich women experience in discharging their work roles and family care responsibilities.

### **Role Clarity**

All the respondents under this study agree that they know their daily routine both at home and at the workplace. Although each day may bring up new challenges, the respondents know what is required of them both at home and at the workplace. Because of the fact that family role and workplace role are performed on day-to-day basis, both roles may have been internalized into their cognitive sets. Consequently, the sandwich women are fully knowledgeable of what their daily routine demands.

### **Stress Coping Strategies**

The sandwich women in this study identified the following coping strategies:

1. relaxation;
2. discussing problems with support groups;
3. meditation;
4. role management;
5. time management;
6. problem-focused coping;
7. dialogue;
8. learned helplessness;
9. maintenance of the positive outlook on life.

Additional coping strategy which the sandwich women recommend for other sandwich generation women faced with conflicting role of work / family demands is ‘assertiveness,’ that is, “saying no when they ought to”. Although relaxation is negatively related to multiple role stress, taking time off the work and family roles could bring frayed nerves to relax. When the researcher interviewed some of the sandwich women on how to practice relaxation, many refer to relaxation as taking a bottled chilled wine in a relaxed mood. This perhaps explains the fact that many sandwich women do not know how to achieve what they intend to achieve.

Time management is one coping strategy sandwich women use to cope with the multiple role stress. When some of them were interviewed, one of them said, “I arrange activities, particularly family roles such that one activity follows another in order of most pressing. But sometimes, life exigencies threaten the systematic arrangement of how things should be”.

This is common in African culture where extended family ties are highly cherished. In this culture, other people’s needs may interfere with role performances of sandwich women. Such interferences may come from the need to attend funeral ceremonies, wedding/marriage outings, and other social outings.

Discussing problem with support groups is another coping strategy sandwich generation women use to cope with multiple role stress. This method is more prevalent among women than men since women are more open than men to discuss out their problems. Discussing care giving problems with a confidante (a person you talk to with complete candor) helps to ease one’s ‘bottled up’ tensions. In addition, confiding with a close friend also helps in evaluating individual’s “entrapment” on the stress-provoking situations. Furthermore, special support networks function to provide emotional

support, by providing informal information exchange with the unit of support, which may inspire positive coping. However, social support does not eliminate stress; it only shields the person from the negative effects of stress. Some of the respondents also reported that they use meditation as one of the ways of coping with stress. As one of the respondents said, “I pray to the Almighty God and hope that someday I will be out of this seemingly endless problem; each time I kneel down to pray, I always present my conditions before our creator”. The above response suggests that some of the respondents are in a state of helplessness.

Other coping strategies sandwich women adopt include problem-focused coping; dialogue with the care recipients and maintenance of positive outlook on life by the care givers. Dialoging with the care recipients helps to put them in the right perspective. Sandwich women acknowledged that such method has helped reduce stress to them. Accepting life in good faith was also one method they use to cope with stress. This action is in line with a popular saying that what you cannot change you should accept with cheers.

## **Conclusions**

Sandwich generation women suffer a great deal of stress as they juggle the demands of their children, elderly parents, husbands and the prescribed work roles. Even at that, the sandwich women do not receive enough supports from their husbands and this has exacerbated the stress they experience from their multiple role occupancy. Similarly, the care-receivers also suffer a great deal of stress, which centered mainly on the problem of adaptation occasioned by the demands of their new environment. However, sandwich women employ a number of coping strategies to buffer the effects of stress-provoking situations prevalence in the work/family domains. The coping skills, notwithstanding, there is a need for other members of the family; especially the husbands to provide supports in family care responsibilities.

If adequate assistance is not provided to the caregivers, the multiple roles, which sandwich women encounter, may impact negatively on their health. This issue should be viewed with seriousness since well-adjusted and healthy women are the most useful possessions of any nation. This is because when the health of the caregivers deteriorate their care giving functions will suffer, which may disintegrate the family web.

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