

CAUGHT IN

Asia's growing sandwich generation is coping with dual caregiving pressures



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THE MIDDLE

SUMMARY

- Demographic changes in Asia are creating a growing cohort of people in midlife caring for parents with acute needs while also raising children.
 - Many delay seeking help or struggle to access support, putting more pressure on themselves and allowing problems to fester.
 - Meeting their needs will be critical for helping Asian societies adapt to the realities of larger silver generations and changing family dynamics.
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Simultaneously caring for both older and younger dependents is becoming more widespread across Asia. That means that many working professionals today take kids to school in the morning and parents to the doctor after work.

The pressures on this “sandwich generation” can be severe. Raising children has become more complex with the growing awareness of developmental challenges, rising mental health concerns, and escalating cost of education.

Tending to ageing parents – an emotional obligation and financial necessity for many in Asia – compounds the complexity of contemporary family life.

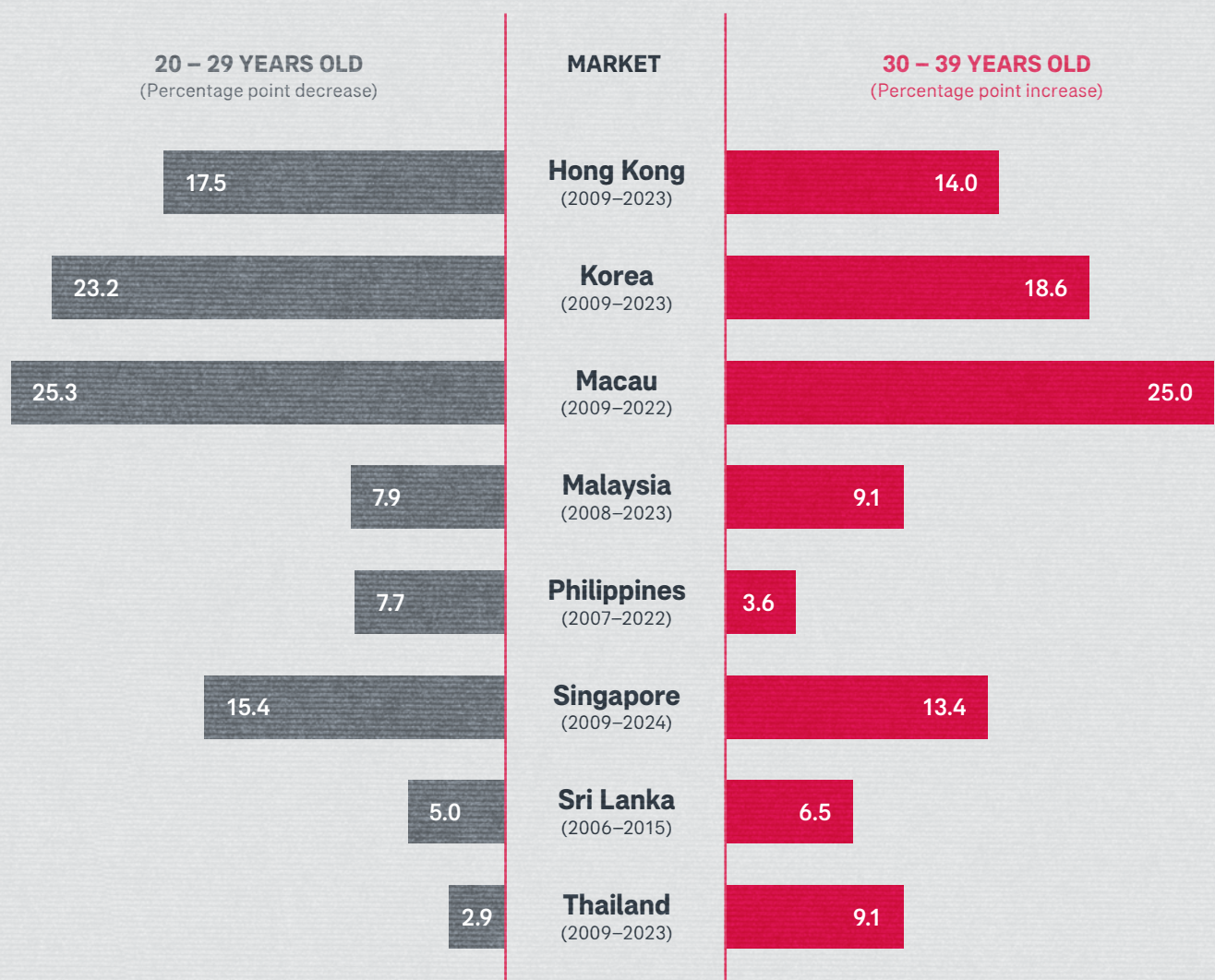
The resulting stress can take a toll on caregivers’ productivity at work, personal finances, and their own health. Uncertainty over where and to whom to turn for help can be overwhelming and lead to decision paralysis. Many put off seeking help until circumstances force their hand.

A side-effect of Asia's ageing

Longevity gains have combined with people having children later in life to increase the overlap between the periods when seniors and children require hands-on care. These trends can be seen to varying degrees in markets from the Philippines to South Korea.

RIISING AGE OF PARENTS

Percentage point change in births by age of mother, pre-2010 versus post-2022*



Source: United Nations Demographic and Social Statistics

*The latest data in the database for Sri Lanka is 2015

The result is a squeeze on families across the region. A recent survey by the Woori Financial Group found that 43% of South Koreans aged 45-54 support children and parents simultaneously. In Hong Kong, more than 60% of seniors with long-term care needs live with their children. On the Chinese Mainland, many in the sandwich generation have no siblings to help shoulder the responsibility.

THE DUAL PRESSURES ON ASIA'S SANDWICH GENERATION

How dual caregiving compresses finances, careers, and wellbeing across three generations

TIER 1: CHILDREN

- Education costs
- Developmental challenges
- Mental health concerns

TIER 2: WORKING ADULT

- Career pressures
- Retirement savings
- Personal wellbeing

TIER 3: AGEING PARENTS

- Chronic illness
- Dementia risk
- Long-term care needs

A mix of financial, emotional, and logistical pressures

The sandwich generation may be funding childcare, school fees, medical care, prescription drugs, and home modifications for elderly parents—all while saving for retirement.

In Korea, AIA found that these people experience higher stress and caregiving-related fatigue. They express concerns about their own retirement preparedness and the future availability of care. These concerns appear across Asia where dual caregiving is pervading society.

“The most common source of stress is lack of time, and the second is financial,” said Grace Cheng, founder of the Hong Kong-based social enterprise Agewhale, which provides services for families in the city with caregiving needs.

Sandwiched employees carry their challenges into the workplace. Relative to their counterparts, they report higher levels of family-related interference with work and take sick leave more often.

“We’ve heard from people that they have to work fewer hours, pass on a promotion or even resign because they couldn’t manage everything,” says Grace Cheng, who also helps companies with workplace programmes for sandwich generation employees.

43%

of South Koreans aged 45–54
support both children and
parents simultaneously.

Navigating childcare and elder care

Like all parents, those in the sandwich generation are dealing with perennial parenting concerns like education and health. Nowadays, kids' health concerns increasingly include developmental challenges, such as impediments to speech, motor skills, and learning, as well as mental health.

In addition, parents today are grappling with the higher cost of education. Many in Asia want to send their children abroad for school or university, introducing complexities with currencies and setting up foreign accounts.

An added challenge: in some countries, such as Korea, kids are living with and remaining financially dependent on their parents for longer than in the past.

In many cases, what makes the sandwich generation particularly vulnerable is the responsibility of caring for ageing parents. Parents' needs can be less predictable and more acute – dementia, impaired mobility, multiple medications. The cost is emotional as well as financial.

"When a crisis occurs, if the parents can't afford it, then responsibility naturally falls on the children, and it's usually not something they've budgeted for," says Grace Cheng.

60%+
of seniors in Hong Kong with long-term care needs live with their children

Waiting too long to ask for help

For several years, AIA Korea has offered services that could be used by policyholders' family members, including parents and children. However, many families sought help only after a diagnosis rather than when a concern first surfaced.

It's a pattern observed in other markets, especially for elders who may resist help.

"A common attitude is, 'My dad seems fine, he's going to yum cha and playing mahjong,'" says Grace Cheng, who encourages people to act before a health event arises.

"Uncertainty over where and to whom to turn for help can be overwhelming and lead to decision paralysis. Many put off seeking help until circumstances force their hand."

From access to empowerment

Another barrier to asking for help: feeling bewildered by options. People can turn to various sources of help, from government services to insurance and civic organizations like Agewhale. But support must be easy to understand. And people need encouragement to use it sooner than later, as well as help navigating options.

“The support family caregivers need is often at the point when they have to make a decision about care,” said Janice Chia, founder and Managing Director of Ageing Asia, which advocates for the senior community. “In these moments, do they know whom to contact, how much things will cost, what service provider is best placed to support them?”

Insurance is adapting to the needs of the sandwich generation. In the Chinese Mainland, AIA helps policyholders find the right care options by screening caregiving service providers for qualifications and safety standards, and monitoring the delivery of services.

Another adaption is covering wider range of conditions to include those that are common among juveniles as well as those that seniors are prone to contract. For example, some AIA critical illness policies cover children’s issues such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, as well as ageing related conditions like Alzheimer’s disease.

Through more frequent and targeted communications, AIA Korea is encouraging customers to make active use of preventative services available to parents and children. This includes health check-ups and specialist referrals, so that care can begin before a diagnosis triggers the need for in-person support like home care.

And AIA offers educational savings products that can be structured to provide cash when needed to cover school fees. Savers can choose from multiple currencies to help fund a child’s overseas education.

A logical next front for insurance would be offering coverage through employee benefits programmes. That would help make support more accessible and mitigate the productivity-sapping effects of sandwiched living.

As Asia ages, dual caregiving is becoming a defining stage of life for many people. How well health systems, companies, governments, and civil groups support the sandwich generation will affect how successfully societies adapt to the realities of a graying population.

REFERENCES

- ¹ 2021 Population Census – Thematic Report: Older Persons, Page 87, section 9.4: “In 2021, among persons aged 60 and over who had long-term care needs and were living in domestic households, 34 487 (10.4%) were living alone, 45.9% were living with spouse (of which 27.3% were living with spouse and children while 18.6% were living with spouse only) and 33.8% were living with child(ren) only.” 2021 Population Census Thematic Report: Older Persons
 - ² Lei L, Leggett AN, Maust DT. A national profile of sandwich generation caregivers providing care to both older adults and children. *J Am Geriatr Soc.* 2023; 71(3): 799-809. doi:10.1111/jgs.18138
 - ³ Bratberg, E. 2002. “The Double Burden: Do Combinations of Career and Family Obligations Increase Sickness Absence Among Women?” *European Sociological Review* 18 (2): 233–249.
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