

THE ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN IN THE MODEL OF SHARED CARE FOR THE ELDERLY AND CHILDREN--A CASE STUDY OF AN INTEGRATED SERVICE CENTER FOR THE ELDERLY AND CHILDREN IN CITY B

ZhengJia Lu*, YuChen Zhou, WanRong Liu
China Women's University, Beijing 100101, China.
Corresponding Author: ZhengJia Lu, Email: 1696234476@qq.com

Abstract: This study focuses on an integrated service center for the elderly and the young in City B. It explores in-depth its transition from a single elderly care institution to an intergenerational co-care platform, with a special focus on the pivotal role played by middle-aged women in the process. The study adopts a diachronic institutional analysis perspective, and through combing policy texts, reading key literature, and conducting in-depth interviews, reveals how middle-aged women have successfully transferred their family caregiving experience to community service scenarios, realizing the role transition from "private caregiver" to "public coordinator". The study reveals how middle-aged women successfully transfer their family caregiving experiences to community service scenarios, realizing the transition from "private caregiver" to "public coordinator". The study found that middle-aged women, with their unique ability to transform resources, made significant contributions to intergenerational interactions, resource integration and emotional support, and contributed to the improvement of the quality and efficiency of community services. Despite the geographical limitations of the study, the results provide innovative solutions to the challenges of population aging and childlessness, and highlight the need to further optimize the model of co-parenting between the elderly and the young through policy support and institutional innovation. Future research should expand the scope and delve deeper into the psychological state and career development needs of middle-aged women in order to refine the understanding of the model and promote its wider application.

Keywords: One old and one young; Middle-aged women; Co-parenting; Intergenerational co-parenting

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Significance of the Study

Under the dual role of demographic transition and policy drive, China's community services are experiencing a paradigm shift from single supply to intergenerational integration. City B, as a testing ground for mega-city governance innovation, has an elderly population of 60 and above accounting for 30% of the population, with a shortfall of more than 70,000-80,000 nurseries for infants and young children between the ages of 0-3 years old, giving rise to the dual pressures of "care for the silver-haired" and "care for the young". In this context, the company was founded in 20 years ago. Against this backdrop, a public-private partnership community service center (government site support + private organization operation), established in 2021, took the lead in responding to the national "one old, one young" overall solution at the end of 2023, completing the transformation from a single elderly care institution to an intergenerational co-care platform, providing a vivid sample for cracking the resource mismatch[1-3].

This study focuses on a group of middle-aged women (45-59 years old) who show unique pivotal value in institutional transitions. By reconstructing their family caregiving experiences, these women, who are in the triple transition phase of "empty nest, career transition, and menopause", have developed a new type of practical wisdom in intergenerational activity planning and inter-age communication mediation. This role transition from "private caregiver" to "public coordinator" not only confirms the localized practice path of Intergenerational Solidarity Theory, but also provides a theoretical growth point for the transformation of the value of gendered labor in community governance[4-11].

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the above realities and theoretical contexts, this study is organized around three core dimensions:

First, in the process of institutional transformation from "age-friendly" to "intergenerational" services, how can middle-aged women build a service hub connecting the needs of the elderly and childcare through experience transfer and skill reorganization? How does this process reflect the tension between private family labor and public participation?

Secondly, are the intrinsic motivations that drive this group to continue to invest in intergenerational services, in addition to policy guidance, deeply echoed in the emotional needs and demands for social capital reconstruction specific to their stage of life?

Thirdly, under the public-private partnership model, what structural obstacles exist in the design of the established system in terms of empowerment of the main parties and risk sharing? How can the governance potential of

middle-aged women be unleashed through institutional innovation?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Background and Status of Research

With profound changes in the global demographic structure, population ageing and paedophilia have become common challenges for many countries. According to United Nations projections, by 2050, the global elderly population aged 60 and above will account for 30% of the total population, while the proportion of children aged 0-14 will drop to 17%. This trend poses a serious challenge to the traditional model of elderly care and childcare, prompting all sectors of society to seek innovative solutions. As an emerging service delivery model, the elderly-child co-education model is gradually gaining attention. By organically combining elderly care and childcare services, this model not only realizes efficient utilization of resources, but also promotes communication and integration between different generations, providing new ideas to alleviate the pressure of elderly care and childcare[6]. Domestically, with the rapid economic and social development, the problems of population aging and paediatrics are also becoming more and more prominent. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics shows that as of 2023, China's elderly population aged 60 and above has exceeded 290 million, accounting for 20.9% of the total population, while the population of young children aged 0-14 is about 230 million, accounting for 16.2% of the total population[7]. Against this background, the exploration and practice of the old-child co-education model has gradually emerged in China[8]. As a functional core area in China, the demographic characteristics and service needs of X district of B city provide a typical case for the practice of the old-child co-education model.

2.2 Research Gaps

Despite the fact that studies have extensively explored the model of co-education between the elderly and the young, there are still some research gaps. First, most of the existing studies have focused on the overall effects and advantages of the model, but have not explored in depth the unique role and value of middle-aged women, and lacked systematic research on their participation mechanisms and influencing factors. Second, there are fewer studies on the applicability and promotion strategies of the model in different regions and types of communities, and there is a lack of targeted guidance recommendations. Finally, there is a relative lack of research on the long-term effects and sustainable development of the model, and there is a need to further explore its potential and prospects in addressing the challenges of demographic change.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on a public-private partnership community service center in City B. Established in 2021, the center initially focused on embedded elderly care services, and at the end of 2023, it took the lead in transforming its service model in response to the national policy of coordinated development of the "one old, one young", and became the first demonstration unit in the city to integrate the functions of elderly care and childcare. The center's operation model is typical of government-enterprise cooperation: the government provides standardized space and bears the basic operation and maintenance costs, while the private organization is responsible for service innovation and personnel training, forming a dual-wheel drive pattern of policy guidance and market mechanism. In terms of data collection, the research data mainly comes from three parts: first, systematically combing the policy texts formed before and after the transformation of the organization from 2021 to 2023, focusing on comparing the iterative logic of the core provisions such as service objectives, staffing standards, and evaluation system; second, deeply interpreting 81 key literatures in the field of intergenerational research on the elderly and the young both at home and abroad from 2019-2025, and constructing a "policy-driven - intergenerational" model. Secondly, the study has deeply interpreted 81 key literatures in the field of intergenerational research from 2019 to 2025 at home and abroad, and constructed an analytical framework of "policy-driven - service transformation - main body reshaping". Thirdly, the study has conducted in-depth interviews with the executive managers of the organizations, focusing on the reconstruction of the competence of the existing nursing caregivers, the dilemmas in the establishment of intergenerational safety standards, and the boundary of power and responsibility between the governmental regulation and the organizations. The study adopts the perspective of historical institutional analysis and focuses on revealing three transformation mechanisms: first, through the analysis of the evolution of key words in the policy text, we trace the transformation of the institutions from "ageing-friendly renovation" to "intergenerational space creation"; second, we find that the goal of the institutions for middle-aged women is to create an intergenerational space for the elderly. First, through the analysis of the evolution of key words in the policy text, we find that the roles and contributions of middle-aged women in co-care for the elderly and the young are still being explored and researched in both academic and practical circles, and that their importance is gradually being paid attention to and emphasized. Second, based on the qualitative analysis of service cases, it reveals how middle-aged women transform traditional caregiving experience into intergenerational communication skills, for example, when organizing grandparent-grandchild co-education activities, their ability to mediate conflicts in the family scenario is transformed into conflict resolution strategies in community services. Third, through the analysis of the operation logic of the public-private partnership model, it is clarified how the government's infrastructure supply and the private service innovation capacity jointly shape the participation ecology of middle-aged women.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Practice Trajectory of Service Model Transformation

The creation of this service center is a vivid illustration of the precise match between policy guidance and community needs. Officially opened in late 2023, the center's core "1+3+X" service model builds a new intergenerational service ecology - 1 core, 3 supports, and X innovations: with the community meal service as the base, it covers the three basic functions of basic old-age protection, quality enhancement of the energetic elders, and management of chronic illnesses, and extends intergenerational integration, cultural inheritance and other characteristic scenarios. This structured design breaks through the limitations of traditional service organizations, which emphasize basic protection but not intergenerational interaction. In the Dual-age Integration PEN Activity held in the first half of 2024, senior calligraphy enthusiasts and custodial children worked together to complete the creation of themed scrolls. This activity vividly demonstrated the positive contribution of spatial integration to intergenerational interaction. Through joint artistic creation, the interaction between seniors and children became more frequent and in-depth, with seniors rekindling their passion for creativity in the process of instructing the children in calligraphic skills, while the children's childlike questions inspired the seniors' novel interpretations of the aesthetics of traditional calligraphy. The video footage of the event clearly captures the positive interactions between the participants and demonstrates the rich results of intergenerational cooperation, strongly proving that spatial integration can effectively catalyze intergenerational communication and integration.

4.2 Realization of the Pivotal Role of Middle-Aged Women

In the daily operation of the service centers, middle-aged women's groups have demonstrated their unique ability to transform resources. Taking the management team of the central cafeteria as an example, the five female staff members aged 45-55 have extended the meal delivery service into an emotional bond through the innovation of the "intergenerational meal delivery" mechanism: when delivering nutritious meals to the elderly who live alone, they synchronize the collection of their unused books and transfer them to the community bookstore; when delivering children's meals to the families of dual-income earners, they attach the paintings of the students of their custodial classes as emotional tokens. The essence of this kind of service innovation is the value spillover of their family caregiving experience - the so-called "value spillover" refers to the fact that middle-aged women have transformed their multitasking skills cultivated in the family, such as caring for the sick elderly and their school-age grandchildren at the same time, and their emotional coordination skills, such as resolving intergenerational communication conflicts, into strategies for resource integration and intergenerational interaction design for the purpose of realizing personalized care and service. Intergenerational interaction design in community services, thus realizing the creative transformation of private experience into public value.

4.3 Generative Logic of Stress Relief

The center's practical innovations show unique effectiveness in the organic coupling of intergenerational needs. 24-hour bookstores create a gravitational field for intergenerational transfer of knowledge through the reconstruction of spatial narratives: in the "silver-age story corner", the comprehensive service center employs a retired teacher to narrate the cultural history of canals for after-school children every week, and the children spontaneously make models of the story scenes in clay to return the gift; the "children's voices reading area" has become an incubator for language vitality, and the young learners' tender poetry recitation often triggers the elderly audience to sing and sing along with them. The "children's reading area" became an incubator of language vitality, and the young students' tender poetry recitation often triggered the elderly audience to sing along with the collective beat of the rhythms. This two-way flow of knowledge transfer and emotional feedback has transformed the bookstore beyond its traditional reading function into a third space for intergenerational spiritual interaction.

More revealing is the creative articulation of the service chain. During the consultation process in the Health Consultation Room, the doctor found that Mr. Zhang, an elderly person living alone, was afraid of the smart blood pressure monitor, so he linked up with the nursery class to carry out the activity of "Little Technology Tutor". The study found that when the children demonstrated the operation of the devices in a playful manner, the elderly not only mastered the skills quickly, but also regained their confidence in learning under the children's patient guidance. This kind of intergenerational interaction, which is naturally derived from the service touchpoints, exposes the demand-response relationship that has been obscured under the traditional age-specific service model. It is these seemingly minor scene innovations that ultimately pushed the street governance system to include intergenerational integration ability in the evaluation of the core qualities of community service providers[9].

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Practical Tensions in the Intergenerational Inclusion Model

The service center's characteristic "1+3+X" model shows the localized practical picture of the theory of intergenerational integration. The innovation of activities represented by the Two-Elderly Integration Pen Meeting

reveals the unique mutual feeding effect between the cultural precipitation of the elderly group and the curious nature of children - the elderly calligraphy enthusiasts rekindle their passion for creation when guiding the children to hold the brush and move their strokes, while the children's childish questions often inspire the elderly to interpret the aesthetics of traditional calligraphy in a brand new way. This two-way activation mechanism breaks through the limitations of the "single-age closed loop" of traditional services, but in practice it also exposes the reality of tension: the "tidal" use of intergenerational shared space - participants are crowded during peak hours, while it appears to be cold during peak hours - reflects the challenge of fine-tuning the management of matching intergenerational demand[10-12]. A deeper contradiction lies in the disconnection between policy advocacy and operational norms. In the grandchildren and grandchildren co-learning scenario, the compliance controversy between the spontaneous teaching behaviors of the elderly group and the existing regulatory requirements for childcare is in urgent need of an innovative response at the institutional level, for example, when the elderly spontaneously teach small children something in community activities, there may be a conflict between such behaviors and the existing regulations on childcare services, and the elderly don't have a teaching certificate there, and so on. objective normative conditions, or their teaching content does not meet the requirements of the education sector, as well as the safety of the activities is not guaranteed. This requires the government and relevant authorities to introduce new policies or regulations to clarify the legality of such activities and to ensure that they are safe and in line with educational standards.

5.2 Mechanisms for Transforming the Experience of Middle-Aged Women

Middle-aged women have demonstrated a unique wisdom in translating their experience into intergenerational services. The meal delivery service of the Central Cafeteria is a case in point: they combine meal delivery route planning with insights into the intergenerational needs of the community, collect unused books to enrich the community bookstore when delivering nutritious meals to the elderly, and give handwritten blessing cards to the elderly when delivering meals to childcare classes. This kind of seemingly everyday service innovation is actually a creative transfer of family caregiving experience - the meticulous observation skills cultivated in caring for the disabled elderly are transformed into the ability to design touchpoints for intergenerational resource docking; and the experience of coordinating and balancing the needs of multiple children is sublimated into the art of rhythmic control for inter-age group services. This kind of transformation process confirms the mechanism of "tacit knowledge manifestation" in the theory of practical knowledge, but the current system has not yet established an effective channel for recognizing the value of experience, which makes this kind of innovation more dependent on individual consciousness rather than systemic support[13-14].

6 CONCLUSION

Research Summary This study focuses on a public-private partnership community service center in City B. It provides an in-depth analysis of the center's practical trajectory of transitioning from a single elderly care institution to an intergenerational co-parenting platform. The study found that middle-aged women played an irreplaceable pivotal role in this process. With their unique ability to transform resources, they have successfully transferred their family caregiving experience to community service scenarios. For example, the management team of the central canteen has realized the double value of emotional connection and resource integration through the innovative mechanism of "intergenerational meal delivery". This kind of role transition from "private caregiver" to "public coordinator" not only reflects the localized practice path of intergenerational solidarity theory, but also provides a theoretical growth point for the transformation of the value of gendered labor in community governance. Meanwhile, the center's "1+3+X" service model significantly improves the effectiveness and quality of community services through the organic coupling of intergenerational needs, and provides an innovative solution to alleviate the pressure on elderly care and childcare.

Although this study revealed the key role of middle-aged women in the old-child co-parenting model through case studies, the scope of the study was mainly limited to a single community service center in City B, which may have some limitations. Future research can further validate the effectiveness and universality of the old-child co-parenting model by expanding the sample size to cover more districts and different types of community service centers. In addition, an in-depth discussion of the psychological state and career development needs of middle-aged women in the context of child and elderly co-education, as well as how they balance the relationship between family and work, will provide more comprehensive support and protection for them and help to further optimize the model of child and elderly co-education services[15-16].

In conclusion, this study takes a public-private partnership community service center in City B as an example to explore in depth how the old-child co-parenting model can alleviate the pressure of aging and childcare through the participation of middle-aged women, and analyzes the key nodes and practical effects in the process of institutional transformation. The study reveals the unique contribution of middle-aged women in intergenerational services and the significant advantages of the model in promoting intergenerational integration and improving service quality and efficiency. These findings provide valuable practical experience and theoretical support for addressing the challenges of population ageing and child reduction.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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