

Pathways for improving gender-responsive occupational therapy approaches to understand and support women's and girls' health and wellbeing



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Introduction / Rationale

The World Health Organization (WHO) identified the urgent need for gender-responsive approaches to improve women and girls' health outcomes, wellbeing, and equitable healthcare service design (Manandhar et al, 2018). A recent *Lancet* Commission found gender has been “weaponized” through political, cultural, and institutional systems, undermining gender equity, restricting rights, and weakening health systems' capacity to respond to the health and wellbeing needs of girls and women (Hawkes et al., 2025, p. 1373). Understanding the complexity of women's health and wellbeing requires a robust theoretical foundation that extends beyond traditional health models to consider the nuance of gendered occupational experiences and narratives. Despite being a female-dominated profession, occupational therapy lacks an integrated framework to address gender disparities holistically (Karaba Bäckström et al., 2023; Lima et al., 2023).

Objectives

To explore how complementary frameworks for strengthening occupational therapy's approach to gender-responsive, needs-based, and wellbeing-centred practice.

Methods / Approach

Theoretical triangulation was used to reflexively analyse the intersections, gaps, and complementarities of gender-justice within these three frameworks:

- Occupational therapy
- Human development and needs (including health and wellbeing)
- Matricentric feminism and intersectionality

Concept mapping was applied to synthesise their relevance to occupational therapy paradigms, theories, and practice frameworks (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 | Theories triangulated



Results

What OT already does well

Recognises occupation as shaped by physical, social, and cultural contexts

- Addresses participation, roles, routines, and daily functioning
- Supports life transitions across the lifespan
- Uses person-centred, strengths-based practice
- Advocates for occupational justice at individual and community levels

What needs strengthening

Explicitly name gender as an occupational determinant

- Theorise wellbeing & occupational needs equitably with health and occupational issues.
- Analyse power, agency, inequity, and unpaid care through gendered occupations
- Embed gender-responsive, rights-based practice frameworks
- Shift more upstream to prevention, health determinants, systems change, and wellbeing promotion

Results

OT is ethically committed to occupational justice but struggles with gender-justice.



Why women’s and girls’ health & wellbeing matter

Scale and impact: Girls and women make up half the population and represent the majority of health service users *and* healthcare providers. Better outcomes for women improves individual, family, community, and societal wellbeing (Hawkes et al., 2025).

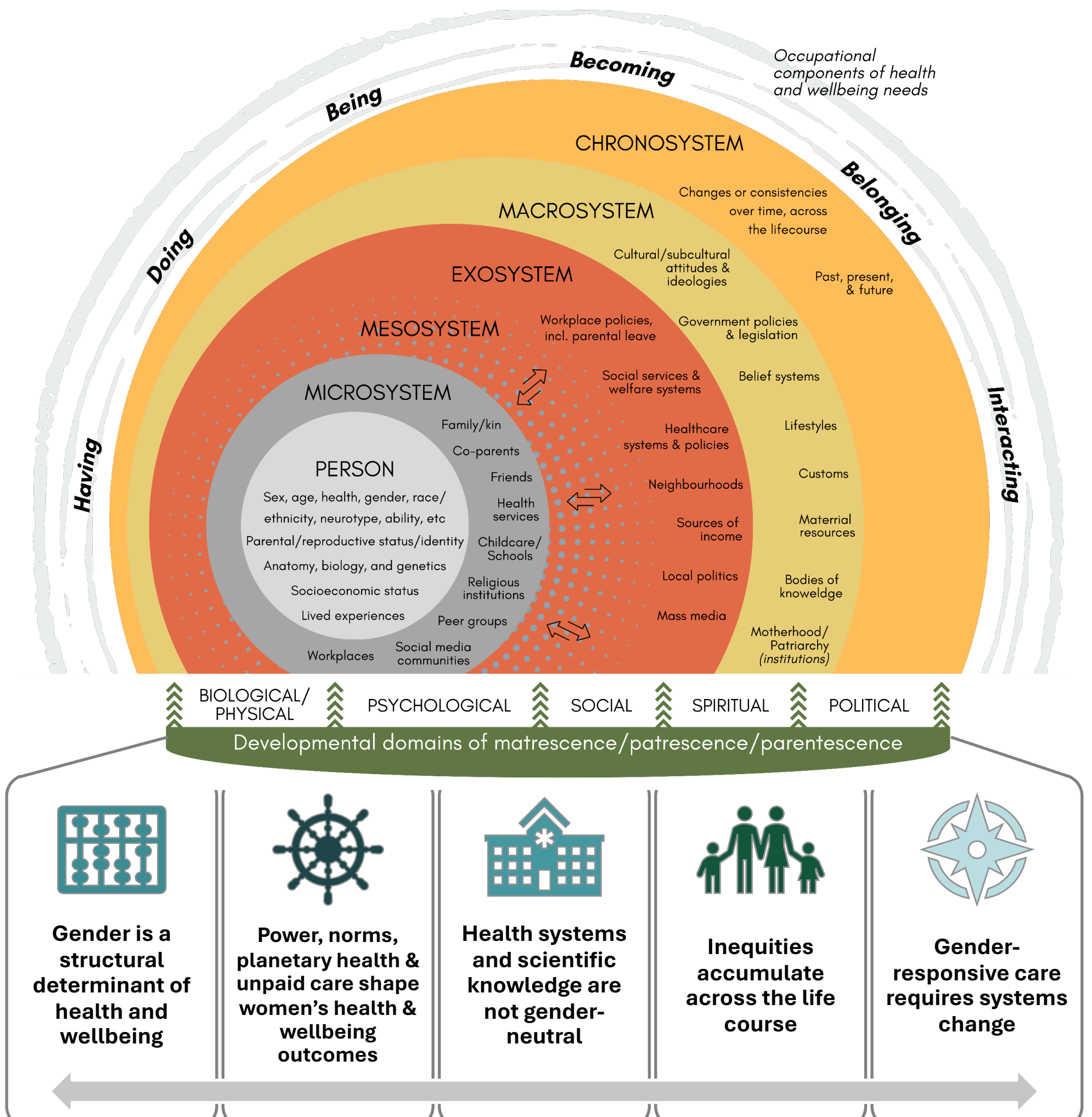
Equity: Women and girls experience persistent structural inequities (income, safety, healthcare access, caregiving expectations).

Life-course effects: Inequities accumulate over time. Early support can prevent longer-term disability, deprivation, and exclusion (education, work, participation).

The maternal wall: Women’s wellbeing strongly shapes children’s development and family functioning - not because mothering is in ‘women’s nature’ or ‘responsibility’, but because systems load family care onto mothers (O’Reilly, 2019).

OT relevance and leadership: If the occupational therapy profession wants to lead in prevention and wellbeing (not only rehabilitation), women’s health and wellbeing is a key arena where occupation, determinants, and justice intersect (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 | Occupational bioecological framework for gender responsive care



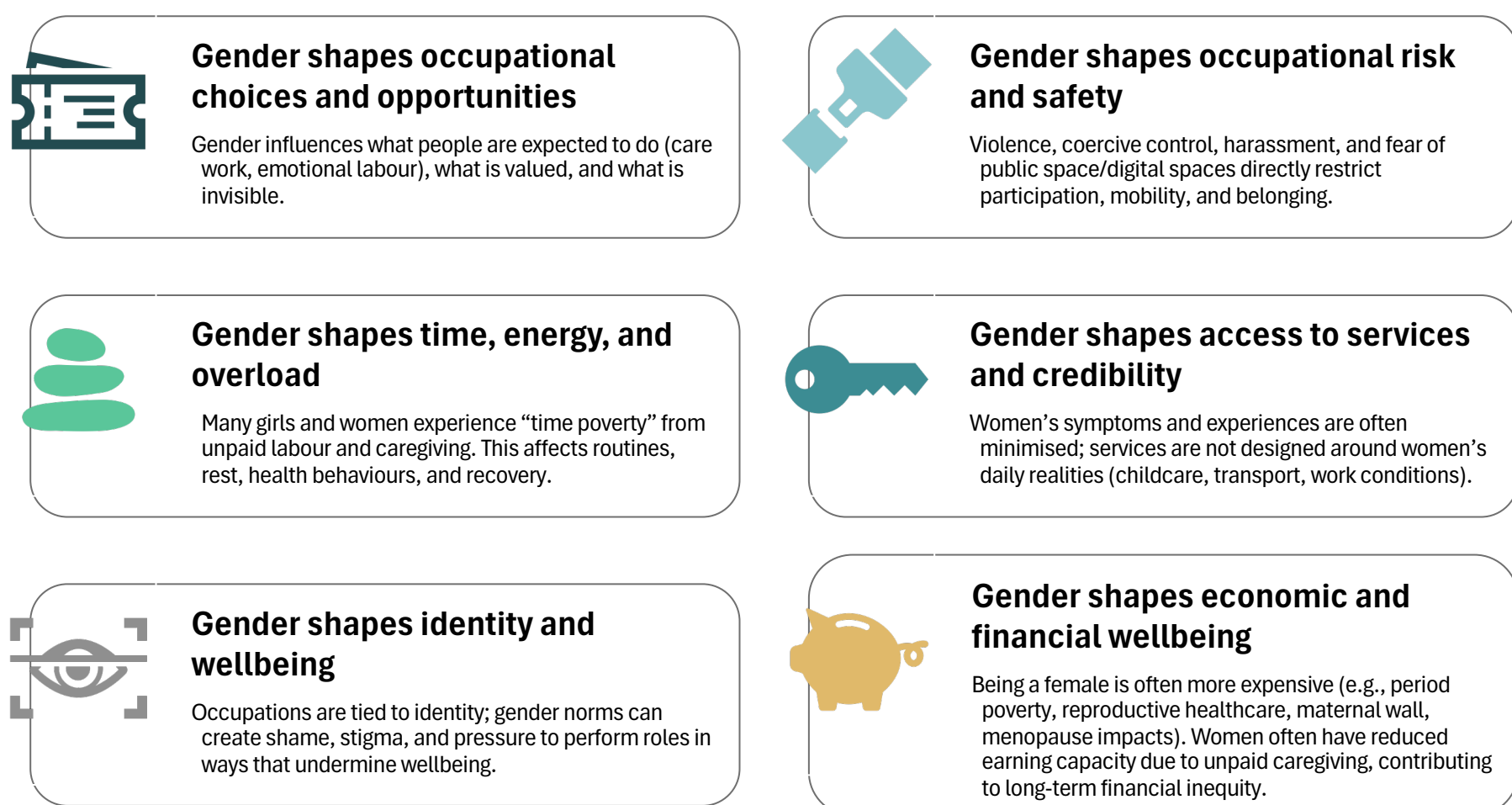
Note: Adapted with permission from Figure 7.1 Ecological and developmental domains of matrescence: A bioecological framework in Slootjes, H. (Ed.). (2025). Enhancing Women’s Wellbeing During Matrescence, Motherhood, and Perinatal Transitions: An Evidence-based Guide for Occupational Therapists (1st ed.). Routledge.

Practice implications

By incorporating theories and knowledge from beyond the profession, occupational therapists can deepen their understanding of how meeting needs and improving wellbeing influences occupational deprivation, injustice, and wellbeing for women and girls across the lifespan. This

integrated lens strengthens practitioners' capacity to analyse gendered health disparities and provides a foundation for equity-driven, holistic practice, supporting contextually relevant person-centred, needs-based interventions (see Figure 3). It also supports a proactive shift toward prevention and wellbeing promotion in women's and girls' health.

Figure 3 | Why understanding gender and occupation matters in OT



Conclusion / Contribution to the Occupational Therapy Profession

This study raises awareness of the need for occupational therapy theory to integrate public health, human needs, and gender studies into existing frameworks. Embedding this knowledge in research, education, and practice will

strengthen gender-responsive care, supporting holistic, proactive, and inclusive approaches to women's and girls' wellbeing. This is essential for gender-justice and the future of sustainable wellbeing societies.

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