



# THE MENTAL LOAD WOMEN CARRY

A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON A PERSISTENT PROBLEM

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# Sociology is the study of why people do what people do.

Sociologists aren't focused on you as an individual per se. Rather, we think about the structures that surround you and the ways those structures, and the norms attached to them, make you, me, and your neighbor down the road act a certain way.

And when we study what's going on with a group that's collectively struggling, we move the conversation away from blaming and shaming individuals for their decisions and work to reveal the invisible topography of the world they live in, the opportunities and barriers shaping their lives without their even knowing it.

Sociology provides the lens through which we can look at our actions, our thinking, and our behavior to parse when we are following scripts that were handed to us from birth and when it is time to write a new story. Sociologists coined the term *role model* because we know that people follow the behaviors of others, in ways that are sometimes optimal and sometimes not. Sociology gives you the satellite view of what is happening in your life to see the power of everything around us that impacts how we all move through the world.

That's why sociology is an exceptionally good tool to better understand mental load—a concept I've been studying for years. *Mental load* has become a more familiar term in the last few years, but popular coverage of the concept often reduces it to its smallest parts, treating it as shorthand for making lists or a synonym for household management.

I describe mental load as “emotional thinking.” It’s the difference between managing a calendar at work, which might be logistically demanding but often holds some emotional distance, and managing the family calendar, which is often stressful and emotional, because it involves anticipating things going wrong and dealing with the consequences of letting down the people we love the most.

Did you remember to sign the permission slip for the excursion to the zoo—and if not, will your kid be left out of a major school event? Are your kids doing too few extracurriculars—and now they have too much screen time and not enough skill building around hobbies that can help on their college applications? Did you remember to schedule a date night—and if not, what does that say about your relationship? This work is not just thinking. It’s *emotional thinking*.

It sounds like sweating the small stuff, but a lot of it is the stuff that sustains family life. It is invisible, boundaryless, and enduring.

All people carry a mental load: mothers and fathers, child-free adults, and even children. But the average composition of our mental loads looks different across those groups. It’s true that mothers’ mental load includes a lot of that work, like keeping track of permission slips and ensuring that fridges are stocked with milk and children are coiffed for Crazy Hair Day. But when we look more closely, we discover that mothers’ mental loads are bigger and more complex, a heavy alloy of emotional and mental elements that drags down every aspect of their lives. Consider, for example, the difference between keeping a home tidy enough to find what you need and keeping it tidy enough for you to avoid the social and professional consequences of others’ judgments—which, as we have shown in our research, equate messiness with lower worth for women but not for men.

I have spent decades studying these types of questions: Why do women do more at home? How do we help men step into the family? Why do housework and childcare create so much conflict between partners? What is the impact of all the invisible labor, or the mental load?

I've looked at thousands of studies on these topics. I have personally combed through hundreds of thousands of data points. I have published over seventy-five academic articles and a book on the insights I discovered. I have shared my research findings with millions of people around the world.

My research shows that fathers carry a significant mental load related to their family responsibilities. But the differences in cultural roles for men and women mean that fathers' family responsibilities are much more aligned with the daily grind of work and the big-picture project of career building. It's not only that the consequences of relaxing standards for domestic labor and child-rearing are lower for dads, though that's true too. For dads, the mental load of bringing more money home from work feels like it's in service to their family responsibilities, rather than in conflict with them.

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Millennial dads, in particular, are excited about the fact that they are spending more time with their children than previous generations did. Signaling at work that they are good fathers is a key way to humanize themselves—fathers are seen as more endearing, approachable, and likable because they care for their children.

This doesn't create mental load conflict for fathers—they feel good making contributions to their workplaces, and they feel good spending more time with their children.

Their mental load investment in work can be stressful but often makes their lives feel richer—working hard to help fund a mortgage on a new house, save for kids' college tuition, or take a long-desired family trip to Cancún.

These are mental loads well spent.

But for mothers who also have a job that provides a paycheck, the mental load they carry for work feels in constant conflict with expectations of them at home—investment in one area at the *expense* of the other. Mothers worry one or both is always getting short shrift and end up feeling guilty about whatever choices they make, like they are failing at work *and* at home.

In a way, they are—because our cultural narrative around what makes a good worker and what makes a good mother each demand constant availability and sustained commitment. With their energies siphoned on two fronts, they end up fragmented, overwhelmed, and exhausted. This creates two different experiences in the world of parenting: fathers feeling excited by their mental load investments while mothers feel drained. It means that mothers always feel like they need to give more—good enough is never enough.

They are striving toward some unattainable level of perfection and feeling bad when they inevitably fall short.

It's not just you. And it is not just parents. The mental load is a weight we all carry, but women are sold a handful of lies that make their mental load heavier and more toxic.

The good news is that people are talking about the problem of mental load a lot more often than when I first started studying it. The bad news is that all this conversation has not created meaningful change for many mothers, who are still just as overwhelmed and frustrated as they were when I published my first paper on housework in 2008. Why are we still seeing women saddled by the work at home and feeling exhausted by it all?

The missing ingredient was the mental load. And until recently, we haven't understood what exactly the mental load is, and why it's so heavy for mothers.

People are still unaware that this is not something women are doing to themselves, and that the solution isn't just to care less. Because we don't understand the mental load, conversations around parenting, gender equality, and labor keep bumping up against this *thing* we can't accurately see or measure. And it's so much bigger than keeping the house clean.

We wonder why birth rates are down even in countries with robust social supports and pronatalist policies; we wonder why women are still underrepresented at the top levels of business despite having record-high college graduation rates; we wonder why the pay gap persists despite corporations pouring money into campaigns around confidence and power poses.

As someone who has studied all these things, I've come to a startling conclusion: The mental load is at the heart of the problem.

Mental load burnout is the thing that makes women feel like they're running at top speed but barely moving forward. It's what makes even markers of success—new babies, new jobs, new homes, career advancement—feel exhausting. Mental load is the invisible cognitive-emotional work that drains women and makes them feel like they are living on a kind of paycheck-to-paycheck energy.

The demands of an unwieldy mental load are draining even the most successful women and holding back countless other women from feeling successful at all.

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I had spent years measuring what all the work women do at home does to their careers—limiting their ability to get promoted, reducing their chances of making more money, and increasing their risk of dropping out of work altogether. I looked at how doing it all at home impacts women's marriages by increasing conflict and the risk of divorce. I documented its impact on parenting—how it leads to intensifying feelings of guilt, time pressure and poor mental health, and less sleep.

But I started to grasp the shape and magnitude of the problem only when I went hunting for what keeps women staggering under this load, the forces that keep them from saving energy for themselves.

I found a host of expectations, myths, and explicit and implicit threats to them and their families for violating those expectations. I kept finding again and again, across study upon study, the ways that we have set women up for failure.

We keep asking women to do more and more, holding them to incredibly high standards, and then punishing them when things inevitably go wrong.

As soon as people heard about my research, they started sharing their own stories. I hear about childcare challenges, arguments with spouses who just don't *get it*, and a feeling of constant, unrelenting pressure to be perfect. I hear stories about failed outsourcing that cycles right back to Mom's lap, of overwhelm bubbling out through yelling at everyone, and of scattered brains trying to keep track of it all.

Because we try, there is a myth that women are better multitaskers, whether through nature or nurture. Spoiler alert: We're not. We're just expected to do more work.

The deluge of all these personal stories convinced me there was something big here, and I designed studies that would let me collect more data and sift through it to find patterns. Through a coordinated set of formal interviews, surveys, and focus groups, I heard a consistent theme of women trying to stay afloat in a life with porous boundaries, answering work emails when they're supposed to be watching kids' soccer games and fielding calls from school nurses about sick children in the middle of important meetings.

I identified that across all the tracking permission slips, finding lost socks, and making sure holidays feel special, there were eight distinct categories of mental load work:

1. Life organization
2. Emotional support
3. Relationship hygiene
4. Magic making
5. Dream building
6. Individual upkeep
7. Safety
8. Meta-care

I measured the way women were holding mental loads not only for ourselves but also for our children, our partners, our workplaces, our extended families, our friends, our community, our environment, our political systems, and more. I started to recognize the ways women were describing taking on this unpaid work not because they wanted to but because they were operating under a kind of duress that they weren't even always consciously aware of—saying yes because the alternative was worse and blaming themselves either way.

I am a working parent myself, and studying these struggles and conflicts from ten thousand feet as an academic gave me a perspective that not only led to breakthrough research at my lab but also transformed my life personally. I found myself using the data from my lab to recognize patterns in how my own time and attention were being spent, and the research from all the amazing academics around the world to make more informed decisions about where my precious time and attention went.

**We keep asking women to do more and more, holding them to incredibly high standards, and then punishing them when things inevitably go wrong.**

Once I saw the data on how women's energies are siphoned away from them and started to recognize the carrots and sticks that keep us in this pattern, it was impossible to unsee. It's a form of reverse gaslighting that allows you to think, *Wow, I'm not delusional, and I'm not alone; this isn't about me at all.*

I saw how myths about gender and labor had infested my thinking and piled tasks onto my mental load, even as someone who studies gender and labor. With this new understanding, it was impossible to feel like a failure. I saw more clearly the ways in which I had *been* failed.

I was fired up and energized; with the capacity I'd regained by being more intentional about what deserved my precious energy and, importantly, what did not, I was assembling an ever-larger dossier of proof that we'd fundamentally misunderstood what mental load is and how it functions in real women's lives.

And then came March 2020. For someone who studies mothers' unpaid work, seeing the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic was like watching a tsunami roll in.

Article after article emerged with heart-wrenching quotes from mothers at the breaking point—and they sounded a lot like the women I'd been talking to.

My lab at the University of Melbourne, along with wonderful colleagues Caity Collins, Liana Landivar, and William Scarborough at leading universities across the world, kicked into overdrive to track the scope of the problem.

We measured how mothers' employment dropped during the pandemic, especially in states where schools were operating remotely. We revealed that telecommuting kept some mothers employed but didn't help those in jobs that couldn't be done at home, nor moms with the littlest kids in the home. We found that even breadwinning mothers had to reduce their employment, unable to overcome the added pressures of keeping everyone safe and tending to the heightened demands of work, family, and life during the pandemic. We showed that when heterosexual couples had competing responsibilities, mothers picked up most of the added childcare and housework, at the expense of their sleep and sense of calm.

Other researchers had similar findings. Over the first year of the pandemic, with many schools closed, Brookings found that mothers of kids under age twelve were spending eight hours per day on childcare and six hours on their jobs, while dads were spending five hours on childcare and eight hours on work. The Institute for Women's Policy Research found that four out of ten women reduced their hours or stopped working during the pandemic, and the Center for American Progress found that the average college-educated woman who temporarily left paid work during the height of the pandemic stood to lose between \$346,000 and \$785,000 of income over her lifetime as a result. A study at Oregon State University reported that 68 percent of working moms (and 42 percent of working dads) were experiencing parental burnout, defined as "when chronic stress and exhaustion occur that overwhelm a parent's ability to cope and function." In real time, my colleagues and I were documenting the deterioration of twenty years of gains in women's employment over a few short months—a titanic loss to women's professional and personal lives that didn't disappear with the introduction of a vaccine.

In a culture that asks women, especially mothers, to be everything to everyone without any of the social supports available in other countries—affordable childcare, paid parental leave, mandated access to flexible work, vacation time, or sick leave—the experience of feeling scattered, distracted, and an inch away from complete breakdown is near universal. But even as I interviewed women about what they were going through, I realized how many of them thought that the problem was specific to them.

They didn't just feel stressed out; they felt guilty and ashamed.

Under the weight of a crushing mental load, many seemed to be concluding that they just weren't strong enough to hold it up. Along the way, I heard them wrestling with questions that my lab had found answers to: questions like whether dropping down to part-time work would solve the problem of being overextended (*We studied that, and it turns out that working part time increases work-family conflict!* I wanted to shout). I saw them throwing themselves at huge problems, trying to absorb all the shock, stress, and anxiety so their children and partners didn't have to.

That's when I realized my mission had changed.

I couldn't just measure what was happening. Women all over the world urgently needed help understanding what they were dragging around, why it was so heavy, why it wasn't their fault, and how to lighten it.

From that goal, my new book *Drained* was born. I sought to replicate my own experience of unlearning myths about how I "should" be balancing things and started to think systematically about what was worth the investment of my attention and emotion. I began considering what systems, policies, and workplaces would help mothers thrive and started planning a new kind of research focused not just on observing but on intervening: a coordinated series of case studies, focus groups, and concrete solutions that would test whether the combination of myth busting and strategic thinking that had realigned my life was replicable.

The answer was a resounding yes.

For decades, we have told women that they are responsible for solving this mess. And we have told them that the solutions to all their problems at home are to: (1) gain more power; (2) have men *and* women do more; (3) engage in self-care; (4) outsource to others; and (5) wake up earlier.

While the real solutions that could ameliorate our mental loads—including bold policies that cap work hours or give parents fully paid leave after childbirth or that audit pay to ensure mothers aren't being punished—seem too distant or difficult, we have instead told mothers to work harder and meditate. We have pushed the burden of fixing broken systems onto the backs of individual women, which is pernicious and unfair.

What we need now is a range of policy changes that reflect the fact that most families are those where both parents work, *but* we also need some old-school consciousness raising and concrete tools to help lighten the load. Without these, is it any wonder mothers are holding on by a thread and burnout is at an all-time high? We put mothers into an impossible situation, offer pseudosolutions that rely on women's *additional* emotional-thinking work, and then blame women when things go wrong.

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Of course women feel like something is wrong with them!

We have diagnosed women as the problem when they are, for many, the lifeline.

I started to imagine: What would life look like if we saw these external pressures for what they are—if we admitted that, yes, you’re not making this stuff up, you *are* still treated differently from your husband or your brother in a host of insidious ways? What if, instead of either expecting women to submit to gendered expectations or telling them to stop worrying about them, we started from different assumptions? That our attention and energy are precious. That the social pressures responsible for keeping women in line are very real—but also a lot less threatening in the light of day. That any real help would stop dismissing women’s fears and anxieties as being “too controlling” in favor of helping women to prioritize their energy.

It was by asking these questions that I started to shift my gaze from who was doing what in the home to focus on the invisible work that underpins it all—the mental load. This work required me to get clear on what the mental load actually *is*—because until we make that invisible work visible, we can never have honest conversations about its impact. We can never make informed choices about which loads we might deliberately take on and which we might refuse.

Our mental load energy is not infinite, so spending it impulsively and letting outdated social norms or unexamined assumptions siphon it away leaves us with less to spend on things we care about.

I started to think about how to make us all aware of how valuable our mental load energy is and the urgency of protecting it. I identified the small changes that I have made in my life as a result of being a sociologist—caring less about mess, wearing mismatched socks, and reducing my expectations of what constitutes a “good” job at home—that are my keys to carrying a light mental load and investing my precious energy into my loftiest goals and wildest dreams. I started to test whether these solutions would help others and found that seeing and valuing this work is critical to reaching true equality.

**Once we are aware of where our energies are going, we suddenly have a whole new set of choices about our precious mental resources. It’s like discovering that the bucket holding your time and energy—your capacity for the emotional- thinking work that holds all our lives together and makes them more meaningful—has had a hole in it for years, slowly draining it away drip by drip. But with care, insight, and hard work, we can patch and repair it to keep our energy whole. 📦**



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