

**Mental Load in Single Mothers Balancing Full-Time Work and
Higher Education**

Natasha Gruenert

Old Dominion University

IDS 300W

Dr. Patricia Oliver

26APR26

Introduction

Balancing full-time employment, higher education, and parenting presents a complex and often overwhelming set of responsibilities for single mothers. Beyond visible demands on time, these responsibilities generate an ongoing and largely invisible cognitive burden known as mental load—the continuous process of planning, anticipating, organizing, and decision-making across multiple domains of life. While discussions of academic success and workplace productivity often emphasize time management or motivation, they frequently overlook this cognitive dimension. For single mothers, the accumulation of mental load can lead to decision fatigue, reduced concentration, and emotional exhaustion, ultimately affecting both academic and professional performance. This paper argues that mental load is a critical but underrecognized factor shaping outcomes for single mothers in higher education and the workforce, and that institutional structures often fail to account for or accommodate this invisible labor.

Sources of Mental Load

The concept of mental load is closely aligned with what Daminger (2019) defines as cognitive labor, which includes anticipating needs, making decisions, and monitoring outcomes. Unlike discrete tasks that can be completed and checked off, cognitive labor is continuous and often unacknowledged. In practice, this means that even when no visible task is being performed, mental effort is still being expended. For example, managing a workday in a construction management environment requires sustained attention and precision, yet that focus is often divided by simultaneous planning for childcare, academic deadlines, and household responsibilities. This ongoing mental tracking creates a sense that work is never fully complete.

Recent research further reinforces how disproportionately this burden falls on mothers.

Catalano Weeks and Ruppner (2024) describe mental load as both persistent and gendered,

with mothers carrying primary responsibility for organizing and anticipating household needs. For single mothers, this burden is not shared, intensifying its impact.

This experience reflects broader sociological patterns. Hochschild and Machung's (2012) concept of the "second shift" illustrates how paid labor is frequently followed by unpaid domestic work. For single mothers, however, there is no division of this second shift, intensifying the overall burden and eliminating opportunities for cognitive relief. Responsibilities do not occur sequentially but instead overlap, creating a constant state of divided attention.

Cognitive and Psychological Effects

The cognitive consequences of this overlap are significant. One of the most immediate effects is decision fatigue, a phenomenon that emerges after prolonged periods of decision-making. In professional environments that demand accuracy and accountability, such as construction management, decision fatigue can make it increasingly difficult to maintain the same level of focus throughout the day.

Research by Offer and Schneider (2011) demonstrates that multitasking across roles leads to time fragmentation and increased stress. More recent findings reinforce this pattern, showing that parents—especially mothers—experience reduced rest and increased cognitive demands due to overlapping responsibilities. These constant transitions limit the ability to engage deeply with any single task.

Cognitive overload also affects emotional well-being. As mental demands accumulate, stress and exhaustion increase, particularly when there are few opportunities for recovery. Even intentional coping strategies, such as setting aside time for exercise or relaxation, require additional planning and coordination, which ultimately becomes part of the mental load itself.

Academic Impact

Mental load has a direct impact on academic performance. Even when time is intentionally set aside for studying, the cognitive energy required to process and retain information may already be depleted. Misra and McKean (2000) note that student parents face barriers such as time constraints and financial pressures, which are further intensified by stress.

Recent research expands on this by identifying “time poverty” among student parents, meaning they have significantly less discretionary time and must often combine academic work with caregiving responsibilities (Conway et al., 2021). This reduces the quality of engagement with course material and can lead to outcomes such as rereading content multiple times, difficulty meeting deadlines, and reduced participation in academic discussions.

Importantly, these challenges are often misinterpreted. Inconsistent performance may be viewed as a lack of discipline or motivation, rather than as the result of structural and cognitive constraints. This misunderstanding reinforces the invisibility of mental load within academic environments.

Workplace Impact

The effects of mental load extend into the workplace, particularly in roles that require sustained attention and problem-solving. In environments such as construction management, where accuracy and coordination are critical, divided cognitive resources can increase stress and fatigue, even when performance remains strong.

The invisible nature of mental load means that these challenges are rarely acknowledged in professional settings. Workplace expectations around productivity and availability often assume

full cognitive availability, without accounting for caregiving responsibilities. As a result, single mothers may be evaluated against standards that do not reflect their actual working conditions.

This lack of recognition can influence long-term career outcomes. Perceptions of reliability and availability often shape advancement opportunities, yet these perceptions may overlook the additional cognitive labor required to maintain performance across multiple roles.

Institutional Blind Spots

The persistence of these challenges can be better understood through Crenshaw's (1989) framework of intersectionality. Single mothers often navigate overlapping systems of inequality related to gender, parental status, and, in some cases, race and socioeconomic status.

Institutional policies that fail to account for these intersecting factors may unintentionally reinforce existing barriers.

In higher education, rigid deadlines and attendance policies can create additional stress rather than support learning. Similarly, workplace structures that prioritize inflexible schedules may conflict with the unpredictable nature of parenting. Tighe et al. (2024) emphasize that student parents face interconnected academic, financial, and caregiving challenges, underscoring the need for institutional awareness and support.

Coping Strategies and Their Limitations

In response to these pressures, individuals often develop coping strategies such as strict scheduling, multitasking, and prioritizing essential responsibilities over personal needs. While these approaches can provide short-term stability, they do not reduce mental load. Instead, they shift how it is managed.

Offer and Schneider (2011) note that multitasking is associated with increased stress and reduced well-being. Similarly, sacrificing rest or personal time can contribute to long-term burnout. Even efforts to support well-being, such as maintaining a regular exercise routine, require additional coordination and planning, reinforcing the persistence of cognitive demands.

Counterargument and Rebuttal

One potential counterargument is that the challenges described in this paper are primarily issues of time management rather than structural or cognitive burden. From this perspective, success in balancing work, education, and parenting depends on individual organization, discipline, and the effective use of available time. Some may argue that strategies such as detailed scheduling, prioritization, and productivity techniques are sufficient to manage competing responsibilities.

While time management strategies are important, this perspective overlooks the qualitative difference between time constraints and cognitive load. Mental load is not simply about how time is allocated, but about the continuous and overlapping demands on attention, decision-making, and anticipation. As Daminger (2019) explains, cognitive labor involves ongoing mental processes that persist even in the absence of visible tasks. This means that even well-structured schedules do not eliminate the burden of constantly planning and monitoring multiple responsibilities.

Furthermore, research on student parents challenges the assumption that improved time management alone can resolve these issues. Conway et al. (2021) demonstrate that many student parents experience “time poverty,” limiting their ability to engage fully in academic work regardless of how efficiently they organize their schedules. Similarly, Tighe et al. (2024) emphasize that systemic barriers—such as inflexible institutional policies and lack of

support—play a significant role in shaping outcomes. These findings suggest that framing the issue as an individual responsibility obscures the broader structural conditions that contribute to mental load.

Ultimately, while individual strategies can help manage daily demands, they do not address the underlying cognitive and institutional factors that create and sustain mental load. Recognizing this distinction is essential for developing more effective and equitable solutions.

Toward Institutional Solutions

Addressing mental load requires moving beyond individual coping strategies and toward systemic change. Educational institutions can reduce cognitive burden through flexible deadlines, hybrid learning options, and policies that account for caregiving responsibilities. Workplaces can implement flexible scheduling, supportive management practices, and more realistic expectations around availability.

As Tighe et al. (2024) suggest, improving outcomes for student parents requires coordinated institutional support rather than reliance on individual adaptation. Recognizing mental load as a legitimate factor influencing performance is a critical first step toward creating more equitable environments.

Conclusion

The mental load experienced by single mothers balancing full-time work and higher education is substantial and often overlooked. Both research and lived experience demonstrate that this ongoing cognitive burden affects decision-making, concentration, and overall well-being. While individual strategies may help manage these demands, they do not address the structural conditions that produce them. Greater institutional awareness and policy reform are necessary

to reduce mental load and support sustainable success. Recognizing this invisible labor is essential not only for individual outcomes but also for creating more equitable educational and professional systems.

References

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.

Conway, K. M., Wladis, C., & Hachey, A. C. (2021). Time poverty and parenthood: Who has time for college? *AERA Open*, 7, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211011608>

Daminger, A. (2019). The cognitive dimension of household labor. *American Sociological Review*, 84(4), 609–633. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419859007>

Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (2012). *The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home* (Rev. ed.). Penguin Books.

Misra, R., & McKean, M. (2000). College students' academic stress and its relation to anxiety, time management, and leisure satisfaction. *American Journal of Health Studies*, 16(1), 41–51.

Offer, S., & Schneider, B. (2011). Revisiting the gender gap in time-use patterns: Multitasking and well-being among mothers and fathers in dual-earner families. *American Sociological Review*, 76(6), 809–833. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122411425170>

Tighe, L. A., Sommer, T. E., Sabol, T. J., & Chase-Lansdale, P. L. (2024). Improving the education and wellbeing of student parents. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1532(1), 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.15094>

Weeks, A. C., & Ruppanner, L. (2024). A typology of U.S. parents' mental loads: Core and episodic cognitive labor. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Advance online publication.

