

## **Out of Sight, Not Out of Mind: Gender Inequality in Mental Load and Fertility Intentions in Italy**

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### **Extended Abstract.**

The unequal division of unpaid work between men and women persists in contemporary couples, with women continuing to bear the main responsibility for domestic and care tasks (Balbo et al., 2023). While this imbalance has long been recognized as a central mechanism behind persistently low fertility in developed societies (McDonald, 2000; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015), most studies have focused on visible aspects of household labor—such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare—while largely overlooking the invisible mental work that sustains daily family life.

This “mental load” refers to the planning, coordination, and emotional management of family routines (Damingier, 2019). It involves remembering tasks, anticipating needs, delegating, and worrying about the well-being of family members—activities that are cognitively and emotionally demanding, yet rarely recognized or shared equally between partners (Offer, 2014; Wayne et al., 2023). As such, it constitutes a form of invisible inequality within couples that may be particularly consequential for fertility decisions.

Despite its growing visibility in public debate and recent scholarly advances (Weeks, 2025; Callaghan, 2024), mental load remains largely underexplored empirically—particularly regarding its impact on fertility intentions. This study addresses this gap by examining how mental load and perceived gender inequality in its distribution relate to mothers’ fertility intentions. We focus on Italy, a country marked by persistently low fertility and strong gender asymmetry in the domestic sphere (Barigozzi et al., 2023), offering a crucial setting to explore how invisible household inequalities shape reproductive behavior. A first contribution of this study is to analyze mental load from the perspective of Italian mothers. Like other Southern European countries—particularly Spain, Greece, and Portugal—Italy combines persistently low fertility with strong gender asymmetries in the domestic sphere (Neyer et al., 2013; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015), but stands out as an extreme case due to women’s exceptionally high domestic burden (Mencarini et al., 2017; Pailhé et al., 2019). A second contribution is to distinguish between two ways of conceptualizing mental load: as a gap—the difference between what mothers report doing and what they perceive their partners contribute—and as a total load, the overall burden they feel they carry. Finally, by disaggregating mental load into three distinct dimensions—cognitive, managerial, and emotional—using a multidimensional scale adapted from Wayne et al. (2023), we move beyond aggregate measures and identify which components are most consequential for fertility intentions.

## **Research Framework and Hypotheses**

Building on both the gender revolution framework (McDonald, 2000; Goldscheider et al., 2015) and the stress framework (Wayne et al., 2023), we argue that invisible inequalities in the mental organization of family life play a crucial role in shaping mothers' fertility intentions. When women perceive themselves as carrying a heavier mental burden than their partners—reflecting a larger mental load gap—they may experience greater strain and lower willingness to have another child (HP1). Beyond this imbalance, even when no gap exists, mothers with a particularly high level of mental load may find the prospect of expanding the family more demanding, which we expect to translate into lower fertility intentions (HP2).

In contrast, when mothers perceive their partners as mentally engaged in family management, the sense of shared responsibility may enhance women's well-being and increase their intentions to have another child (HP3). These first three expectations jointly suggest that not only the amount but also the distribution of mental labor within couples is closely related to reproductive decision-making.

We further expect that the negative impact of perceived inequality depends on the overall intensity of mental load (HP4). Specifically, the detrimental effect of the gap should be strongest when mothers already experience medium or high levels of mental load, as the imbalance becomes more salient and draining under heavier cognitive and emotional pressure. Conversely, when the partner's mental load is high, this negative association is expected to weaken, reflecting the buffering role of paternal involvement.

Finally, by disaggregating mental load into its three dimensions—cognitive, managerial, and emotional—we explore whether certain aspects are more consequential than others (HP5). Based on prior research, we anticipate that emotional load, which involves worry and emotional responsibility, will most strongly reduce mothers' fertility intentions, whereas managerial involvement from partners may foster a perception of fairness and support, increasing the likelihood of positive fertility intentions.

## **Data and Methods**

Data come from a national survey of 2,309 Italian mothers aged 20–45 who are in a relationship and have one child. Focusing on mothers of one child ensures comparability in terms of caregiving demands and household complexity.

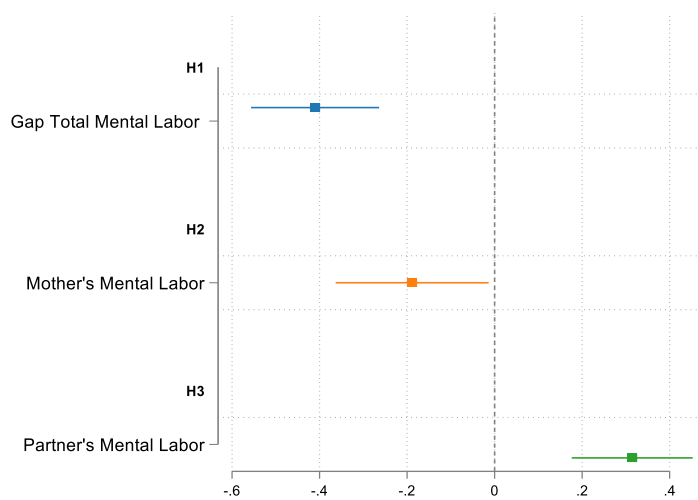
Mental load is measured through a seven-item scale adapted from Wayne et al. (2023), capturing its three dimensions. The total mental load index is calculated as a weighted mean, giving equal importance to the three dimensions (the cognitive item weighted 1/3, each of the remaining six items weighted 1/9). Respondents also assessed the same items for their partners, allowing us to compute a mental load gap (mother's score – perceived partner's score).

The dependent variable is fertility intentions, measured on a 0–10 scale, and asked prior to the mental load section to minimize potential priming effects. We estimate OLS regression models including controls for mother’s age, education, geographical area, marital and employment status, child’s age and health, partner’s employment, and type of childcare support.

## Main Results

Regression results (fig.1) confirm all three primary hypotheses (HP1–HP3). The perceived mental load gap and the mother’s own load are both significantly and negatively associated with fertility intentions, while the partner’s perceived mental load is positively associated.

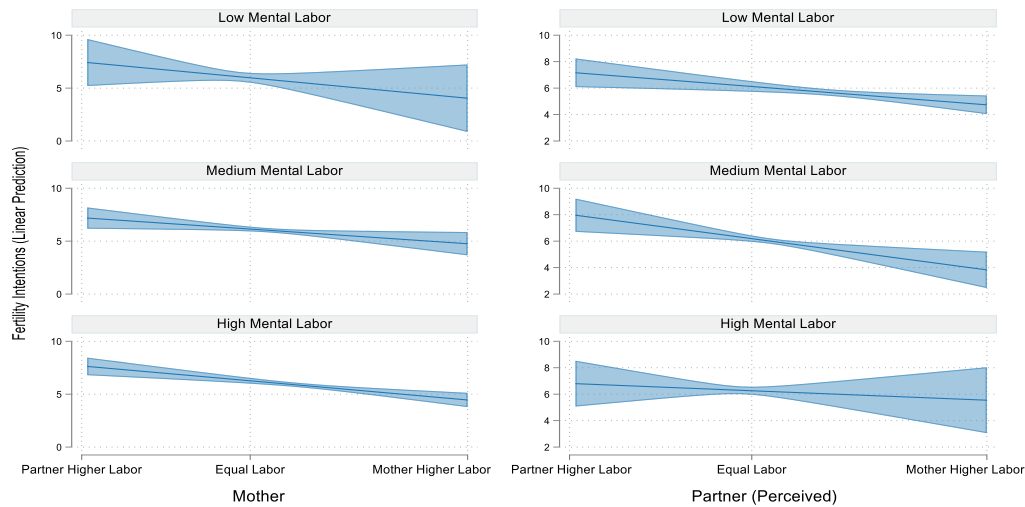
*Fig. 1. OLS regression coefficients for the association between total mental load (mother and partner) and fertility intentions by age group. Significance levels: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$*



Note: Models adjusted for mother’s age, educational level, geographical area of residence, marital status, mother’s employment status, and partner’s employment status, child’s age and health status as well as childcare arrangements.

Interaction models (HP4) indicate that the detrimental effect of inequality is strongest when mothers report medium-to-high mental load, and attenuated when the partner’s load is high, suggesting that paternal mental engagement can buffer the negative consequences of imbalance (fig.2). Finally, when decomposing mental load into its three dimensions (HP5), the emotional dimension emerges as the only negative and statistically significant predictor for mothers, while the managerial dimension of the partner (as perceived by the mother) shows a positive association. This pattern suggests that visible managerial involvement by fathers may foster a sense of shared responsibility, while emotional overload among mothers undermines reproductive intentions.

Fig. 2 Interaction between the perceived mental load gap and different levels of mothers' and partners' mental load: linear predictions of fertility intentions



## Discussion and Implications

These findings confirm that gender inequality extends beyond visible household tasks into the cognitive and emotional domain, and that this invisible imbalance is closely linked to fertility intentions. The results align with our expectations, highlighting that progress toward gender equity in the private sphere remains incomplete. Furthermore, mental load acts as a psychological strain that affects well-being and family planning decisions.

From a policy perspective, promoting mental co-responsibility within couples—through parental leave schemes, awareness campaigns, and workplace flexibility—may help reduce women’s invisible burden and support fertility recovery in low-fertility contexts.

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