

# Under Pressure: the impact of mental load on women's labor productivity and occupational choices – experimental evidence from Kenya

Sveva Vitellozzi<sup>1</sup>, Francesco Cecchi<sup>2</sup>, and Chiara Rapallini<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Bologna, <sup>2</sup>Wageningen University, <sup>3</sup>University of Florence

May 9, 2023

## Abstract

Mental load is a widespread but invisible psychological burden. It mainly affects women, encumbering them with concerns related to household management and children's well-being. In this study, we investigate the gender-differentiated impact of mental load on labor productivity and self-selection into jobs. We conduct a lab-in-the-field experiment with 720 participants in Nairobi, in which we randomly trigger thoughts related to mental load, and then ask to perform an incentive-compatible manual or cognitive task. Results show that mental load reduces productivity by 0.25 SD but only for women in the manual task treatment, not in the cognitively demanding one. Supported by qualitative interviews, we interpret this as evidence that not all jobs are equal, and that jobs that require greater cognitive focus tend to shield from daily hassles, and are less prone to mental load-induced productivity losses. This pattern is confirmed in later occupational choices: treated women that experienced the cognitively demanding task immediately after treatment do not change their behavior, while those who performed the manual task first are more likely to self-select precisely into the less remunerative manual task, with lasting consequences on their income (-0.26 SD). This study provides evidence of an understudied psychological channel that, by creating a negative performance loop, widens the gender productivity gap and contributes to the reinforcement of the psychological poverty traps identified in the literature.

**JEL Classification:** J16; J24; C93

**Keywords:** mental load; gender; poverty; productivity

---

<sup>1</sup>We are grateful to all the participants in the LEAP Development Coffee at Bocconi University, the EconMonday seminars at Wageningen University, the CIES seminar at the University of Florence, SEEDEC 2022, BEEC 2022, and ESA 2022 for insightful comments and suggestions. Special thanks to Fredrick Achar, Amos Tabalia, Salome Njambi, and Alice Wambui for their invaluable help during fieldwork in Kenya. We gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Laboratory for Anti-Poverty Policies at Bocconi University (2021 LEAP Student Grant), professor Leonardo Boncinelli from the University of Florence, and Wageningen University.

<sup>2</sup>The experiment was pre-registered on the AEA RCT Registry and can be found at the following: "Cecchi, Francesco, Chiara Rapallini and Sveva Vitellozzi. 2022. "Under pressure: the impact of women's mental load on labor productivity and occupational