



THE MENTAL LOAD: WHY WORK-LIFE BALANCE ISN'T JUST A BUZZWORD

Why Employers Should Care

For many women, the workday doesn't end at 5pm, it just changes form.

After the meetings and deadlines come school runs, grocery lists, medication reminders, care for ageing parents and being the emotional anchor for everyone else. This is called the **mental load** and though often invisible, it shapes women's work experiences, energy levels, and leadership pathways.

Organisations that fail to acknowledge and address the mental load risk losing some of their most valuable, resilient talent.

“ This is not weakness. It's executive-level resilience. ”



What's the Business Case?

While some still view the mental load as a “home issue,” its impact on business is undeniable:

- It contributes to burnout, absenteeism, and disengagement.
- It silently drives mid-career attrition among women.
- It undermines productivity, performance, and long-term leadership pipelines.
- It limits access to growth not because of ability, but because of outdated support systems.

In South Africa, where many women are both breadwinners and primary caregivers, **the resilience they show in balancing these roles is not a weakness. It's a competitive advantage.**

This is not about adjusting performance expectations for women. It's about **removing the barriers that prevent them from performing at their full potential.**

What is the Mental Load?

The mental load refers to the ongoing cognitive and emotional effort of managing daily responsibilities, planning, anticipating, remembering, and doing all the “invisible” work that keeps life running.

According to *Psychology Today*, women shoulder **71% of household mental load**, even when working full-time. This includes everything from managing childcare and meals to being the emotional manager in both homes and workplaces.

At work, women often carry the load of “office housework” too, organising birthdays, mentoring others, smoothing team dynamics, and volunteering for non-promotable tasks. None of this is reflected in KPIs, but all of it adds up.

Burnout, Disengagement and the Cost of Silence

In South Africa:

- **71% of women** in senior positions report frequent burnout symptoms
- **36% of professionals** cite chronic daily stress
- Work–life imbalance is one of the top reasons women consider stepping back or resigning

(Sources: Stellenbosch Business School, WHO, Kaiser Permanente)

When women step back, it's not a performance failure, it's a structural failure to support the reality they live.

And when organisations interpret burnout as a lack of capability instead of a cry for change, they lose exceptional leadership potential.

This Is Not a Reason to Exclude but Rather a Reason to Enable

It bears repeating: understanding mental load must not be used to exclude women from promotion or opportunity.

If anything, it should validate just how capable they are, managing high-pressure work while keeping complex home systems afloat.

The goal is not to lower the bar, but to clear the runway so they can take off.

Women navigating work, caregiving, and family responsibilities already demonstrate:

- Strategic multitasking
- Crisis management
- Emotional intelligence
- Decision-making under pressure

These are not soft skills: **they're executive skills.**

What Employers Can Do: From Insight to Action

1. Support Boundaries and Balance

- Dismantle cultures that glorify being “always on.”
- Train managers to respect boundaries, not punish them.
- Evaluate performance by outcomes, not availability.

2. Provide Mental Health Resources That Reflect Women’s Needs

- Partner with EAPs to provide counselling and support tailored for working mothers and caregivers.
- Normalise help-seeking behaviours and promote use of benefits.

3. Share the Load, Don’t Just See It

- Audit who’s doing “invisible work” like mentoring and team care.
- Value and distribute these tasks equitably.
- Recognise them in performance reviews and promotions.

4. Redesign Leadership Pipelines

- Flexible leadership roles don’t dilute accountability, they unlock capability.
- Provide hybrid work options, returnship programs, and agile project-based roles.
- Define success beyond hours clocked or desk time.



A South African Reflection

South African women lead complex lives, caregiving for children, parents, even communities, while navigating systemic challenges like gender pay gaps and safety concerns. And yet, they remain one of the most determined, resourceful contributors to economic growth and social stability.

Supporting them is not about charity, it's about building sustainable, inclusive success.

If the corporate world can't accommodate real women with real responsibilities, then it's not built for success.

But if it can? It will be rewarded with resilient leaders, loyal teams, and a stronger business future.

Work-life balance isn't a "nice-to-have" or a tagline. It's a business-critical foundation for women's wellbeing, retention, and leadership development.

And when women succeed: **businesses thrive.**



For more information, support and advice feel free to reach out to us on transneteap@mhg.co.za

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