

Eating habits and food choices at work of working women in the banking sector in Islamabad, Pakistan

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Objective: To find the eating habits and food choices at work of working women in banking sectors in Islamabad.

Methodology: This qualitative study included 11 women working in banking sector who were recruited purposefully. In depth interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis.

Results: Most of the women were taking regular breakfast, lunch and dinner. However, some were skipping breakfast, eat less/no meal at work. Most of the respondents were substituting lunch with fruit salads, snacks, juices, tea and cookies.

Women complained lower energy, fatigue, sleeplessness and pain. However, most placed them in the fair category.

Conclusion: This study confirmed that competitive work environment of banking sectors is pressing women compromising their eating habits, undermining food choices and leaving them face negative health consequences and psychological issues. (Rawal Med J 202;45:698-701).

Keywords: Eating habits, food choices, working women.

INTRODUCTION

Healthy eating habit/food ensures human health, wellbeing and prevents non communicable diseases like diabetes mellitus, obesity, osteoporosis and cardiovascular diseases.^{1,2} The banking sector is emerging as an advanced, competitive and responsive industry. Long working hours, efficient performance of tasks, work pressure, use of sophisticated technology and customers' satisfaction has become the prominent characteristics of modern banking in Pakistan.³

Working women develop poor eating habits and eat less, unhygienic and sometimes skip the food consequently, face serious health consequences.⁴ Working women with children are facing psychological challenges including stress and strain, more work burden and eat poorly.^{5,6} Eating habits along with other environmental elements can lead women to many health challenges including obesity and overweight.⁷ Women who take good care of eating, sleeping, exercise and recreational habits are enjoying good health.⁸

Working women who take good care of their diets have healthy BMI.⁹ No difference was found in dietary intake working and non-working women, however, some demographic characteristics like education can play important role.¹⁰ Little has been

known for working women in banking sector in Pakistan regarding their dietary habits and food choices at work. This study was intended to find the dietary practices and food choices of women working in banking sectors in Islamabad.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 11 women working in the banking sector in Islamabad were recruited through purposive sampling technique.¹¹ They were asked about their demographic information including age, education, marital status, monthly family income, their reported weight, and height. Women with at least three years of employment in the banking sector were include in the study. The women were contacted through a referral in the same employment sector. A written consent was taken from all respondents.

The interviews were conducted at the workplace after mutual agreement of date and time. The interviews range from 20 to 35 minutes. In-depth interviews were conducted in Urdu and translated verbatim in English.

Statistical Analysis: The data were analyzed manually. After cautiously going through the transcribed data several times, codes/categories were developed by identifying commonalities and variations.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics: Age of the women ranges from 27 years to 36 years. The respondents were educated to BBA, MBA, M. Com and MA economics. Majority of the women were married however, two of them were unmarried and one was divorced. Family income of the respondents ranged from Rs. 55,000-175,000/per month. Women reported their weights 52 to 67 Kgs and heights 5.3 to 5.7 feet.

Dietary Habits: Most of the women were taking breakfast regularly however, two of them were occasionally taking breakfast. Breakfast consisted bread, egg, butter, jam, cereal and sometimes *pratha*. Most of the women were taking two major meals i.e. lunch and dinner however, some were only taking dinner as a major meal. Most were taking routine meals comprising bread, curry and/or rice. Women were taking mix of both meat and vegetable in their major meals. Fruits were not part of the diet of most women. Fast food was also the part of the diet of some women. One of the women shared that;

Morning is a tightly scheduled time. Everyone is in hurry to reach to school or office. I eat whatever is available and sometimes I have to carry my breakfast with me in my office." Other woman justified that; *Sometimes I share lunch with my colleagues at office. I normally take little portion of food while I am in office as it becomes very difficult to work after heavy food in the lunch."* One of the respondents shared that; *Being the single female in my office, it feels awkward to eat with male colleagues. Sometimes I join them in the lunch. Most of the time, I take some snacks instead of lunch and get back to work again."*

Food choices at work: Choice of food at work was the combination of various factors. Formal, complete and a routine lunch like bread, curry, rice and salad was not feasible for some reasons. Most of the women preferred substitute for lunch. Some preferred homemade salads and snacks. Others liked *biryani* and tetra pack juice. Fruit salad, burger, *dahyabary*, *samosa* and cookies were yet other choices at work. A woman narrated that; *Choice of food at work depends upon the load of work. Many a times work load only allows cookies*

and tea. It feels very bad to eat while many clients are around and sometimes passing remarks." Other respondent stated that; *Carrying lunch to office becomes very difficult sometimes. Morning hardly allows preparing and managing a proper lunch. Sometimes I take biryani from nearby café or share with colleagues."* A woman shared that; *"What to enjoy food in an office just has to stuff whatever is conveniently available. Routine is very tough, working hours are very long and work load is very pressing. Sometimes even do not think of food."*

Health complains: Helplessness, hopelessness, low energy, fatigue, aches and pains and sleeplessness were the common and frequent health complains stated by women. One of the respondents stated that; *"I feel like I am consuming myself. This job is eating me. I am not getting from this job what I am investing in it. I thought of leaving my job many a times. I think I am a machine."* A woman shared her experience that; *"I am very tired, fatigued and exhausted when I am back experience unexplained pain. I cannot even eat properly. I am unable to sleep comfortably. A woman narrated that; "Tough routine at work and home is making me vulnerable. I think I am compromising my health. I am ignoring myself and my family. I rarely find opportunities to recreate me and my family."*

Perceived health status: Women were asked to rate their health status from excellent, good, fair to poor. Most perceived that they had fair status of health. One respondent perceived her health an excellent and two thought that they had poor health. One of the respondents told that; *"I am fairly healthy, neither excellent nor poor. I ignore my rest, sleep and food sometimes but generally I take care of myself. It becomes very difficult to keep ideal health status."* A woman said that; *Keeping ideal health is not possible. Somewhere one has to compromise. I believe working women are unable to keep ideal health and particularly in our (banking) sector."* Another respondent said that; *Office and home have contrastingly different demands. Keeping balance between both is nearly impossible. Concentration on one is leading to ignore the other and I am moving between the both. To make the both ends meet, I have to sacrifice me (health)."*

DISCUSSION

Dietary practices and food choices are very important for overall health. Healthy eating practices are associated with health and well-being in general.¹² Unhealthy food and eating practices may be one of the leading causes of physical as well as mental illnesses.¹³ Women in modern, competitive employment are generally exposed to many challenges including health.¹⁴

In this study, it was found that women were careful regarding their diet and were taking breakfast, lunch and dinner regularly. However, skipping breakfast, eating less or substituting lunch with snacks and other dietary were also common. Some of them also pointed out towards conflicting gender roles. They had to forgo their breakfast or other meals because they were unable to keep a balance between family and work.¹⁵

It was also found that women found work place very stressing. Heavy workloads, long working hours and challenging service delivery were pressurizing factors for women to compromise the quality of food or skipping the meal at all.¹⁶ Women complained of lower energy, fatigue, stress and many other psychological issues like helplessness. Workplace stress brings negative health outcomes and poor eating habits and choices.¹⁷

Though the body of research has emphasized the inclusion of women in the formal employment sector however, very little evidence substantiates the level of education and employment participation with a healthy intake of food.¹⁰ Women in the banking sectors were educated and well aware of the importance of the healthy diet and its proper intake but, employment and family chores/roles were hindering them for unhealthy food intake. Shift workers have been more likely to eat inappropriate food and skip healthy food items.¹⁸

It was also found that choice of food and food intake was not the mere individual choice but there are certain structural determinants that actually push individuals for their consumptions. Some women pointed out those structural determinants like the availability of food, price, and easiness associated with consumption. These factors also play a very important role in food choice and food intake.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Women working in the banking sector were experiencing a challenging work environment, physical exertion and psychological symptoms. They ate less or skip breakfast/meal and perceive it fair in terms of their health. It also showed their level of dissatisfaction with their diet, choice of food and overall lifestyle. Working women ignore many healthy requisites due to their job and other family related assignments.

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