

# COOKING ROUTINE PRACTICES AMONG MALAYSIAN WORKING WOMEN

**Siti Khuzaimah Abu Bakar, M. Z. Mohd Salehuddin, Mohd  
Syaquif Yasin B. Kamaruddin and Mohd Faez B. Saiful  
Bakhtiar**

*Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management  
Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
MALAYSIA*

## ABSTRACT

*Working is becoming a necessity and one of the most vital elements in this modern era for bachelors and family couples for economic needs. Because of their work, women need to sacrifice many things together with a crucial household responsibility which is cooking. Owing to the increasing number of working women, this study therefore empirically investigated the issues related to cooking routines among working women, particularly in Malaysia. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed among the working women. Through the descriptive analysis, some meaningful insights into the issues of interest were obtained and the findings overtly revealed that working time, the economy and dietary patterns are factors that leave women with no other options but to opt for convenience cooking practices for their family dinner during weekdays. Despite this, to maintain a pleasant family relationship and to love and nurture family members, particularly the growing ones, home cooking is performed during weekends.*

**Keywords:** *Routine, cooking, working women, homemade cooking, convenience food*

## INTRODUCTION

In today's era, family life is busier, more complex and demanding than before, especially when family expenditure and the cost of living both in the rural and urban areas have increased substantially, similarly to other provisions related to family requirements, (Hughes and Stone, 2006). Owing to that complexity, every family is struggling hard in achieving their needs and for betterment of their lives. Oswald, (2003) argued that this complexity is unavoidable as the contemporary environment through the advancement of the economy, education and technologies has altered every facet of the world including lifestyles. As reported by Morris and Madsen, (2007), modernization and technology advancement have had a significant impact on family life as everything including commodities, utilities, apparel etc have continually increased in price.

The abovementioned phenomena have directly led to changes in structure and composition of the household, for instance men no longer act as sole breadwinners for the family. According to Carrigan and Szmigin (2006) there is an increase in the number of women in the workforce as a quest for solutions to the family's economic demands. As reported by Gordon and Whelan-Berry (2004), around 60 percent of American women with children under the age of six were in the work force in the year 2002 and there was a similar percentage of employed women in New Zealand (Lee and Beatty, 2002) as well as most countries in the globe. Rosin (1990) argued that the involvement of women in the work force not only contributes to the family economy but also increases the country's incomes and productivity.

In Malaysia, the increase in women's participation in the labour force can be seen over the last three decades in line with the development of the world economies and export-oriented industrialization and, according to Kaur (2000), the increase of women in the workforce is caused by three main factors. First, the expansion of the economy through the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) since 1970 has created a range of jobs and provided more opportunities for women. The NEP was designed to

eliminate the identification of race with occupation and the State's diversification or industrialization strategies subsequent facilitated the flow of women into the modern sectors of the economy. Second, the equal access to education for both genders, especially in the rural areas through educational reform, resulted in a rising level of educational attainment among the women. The third reason due to the economic demand is particularly related to the increase in families' expenditure and the cost of living expenses. Based on the Ninth Malaysian Plan (EMP, 2006), one third of the Malaysian labour force consists of women.

Many researchers have argued that the increase in women in the workforce has not resulted in a huge shift in their household responsibilities (Beck, 1998; Bonney et al., 1999; Autor, 1998). Women are believed to be carrying most responsibility for food in shaping their family. Thompson (1994) contended that women, even those employed full time, remain a central figure in the duty of care and food preparation. However, many working women with children have been shown to feel frustrated and defeated when they could not organize regular proper family meals or homemade cooking due to their engagement with office work, especially during working days (Moisio et al., 2004). Thompson (1994) identified the regret expressed by American working women who resorted to fast food options or convenience food for their family dinner. Family meals, especially dinner, in fact are more problematic and complex in the present day than in the past for the most of the working women (Romani, 2005). This raises critical questions as to whether the same phenomenon is happening among the working women in Malaysia. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the working women's knowledge of the meaning of homemade cooking, convenience cooking, ready cooked food and eating out, as well as identifying factors that influence the working women's routine of cooking.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Food and Cooking

Everyone would agree that food is a universal necessity for living things. The human body for instance needs food not only for survival but to gain and maintain energy as it contains nutrients like vitamins, minerals, fibre and many others. Although some foods can be eaten raw, most of them cannot be consumed without applying heat, or through the process which is universally known as cooking. Drummond and Brefere (2001) argued that human beings make a tremendous effort to transform raw food into something that is more digestible. Brownlie et al. (2005), looking through a different lens, contended that there is a strong relationship between food and cooking and they are very much related to our daily life, and the availability of the type of food, style of preparation and cooking influence people's eating patterns. Steele (1992) posited that as early as three thousand years ago in food cultural history, food and cooking have been integrated to form an acceptable system such as selecting the right kinds of ingredients, preparation, method of cooking and eating manners or decorum. In term of preparation, different groups have different styles of food preparation (Senauer et al., 1991), depending on the availability of the ingredients and resources (Wyke & Landman, 1997).

Despite the above notion, Martinez (1998) argues that food just like living things is sensitive as well as it involves changes and modernization through industrialization and urbanization which have a major impact on food (Cwiertka, 2000). According to Gillette (1997) some behavioral shifts are occurring in the preparation and consumption of food largely associated with modernization. Modernization in fact not only affects daily food practices but also traditional events and celebrations as well as ceremony. This phenomenon extensively shapes the food even the production, processing and distribution (Sobal et al., 1998 and Sobal, 1999). Jussaume (2001) articulated that the modernization of food production, distribution as well as consumption is encouraged by business and policy makers.

In a different vein, Sheely (2008) identified the lifestyles issues which drive the demand for convenience foods and the changes in household structures, higher female participation in the labour force and longer working hours, consumer prosperity and technology ownership which have created issues pertaining to food preparation and cooking between the homemade and convenient.

## **Home Cooking Versus Convenience Food**

Home cooking could be also symptomatic of a high involvement with cooking and eating meals at home (Murcott, 1995). Mintz (1996) stated that although, over the last twenty years there has been argumentation concerning traditional cooking skills, home cooking is still believed to be turning raw ingredients into complete dishes suitable for the family. This term further evolved when Short (2006) looked on domestic cooking or homemade cooking as real, traditional and using one's own culinary skills. Costa (2007) regarded homemade food as the types of food which are prepared from scratch with raw ingredients and chosen cooking methods and seasoning. Short (2006) on the other hand posited that in depth investigation needs to be done to understand the complexity of knowledge and skill involved in homemade food preparation as it involves fresh basic ingredients, preparation and method of cooking (Caraher, Dixon, Lang, & Carr-Hill, 1999; Lang, Caraher, Dixon, & Carr-Hill, 1999; Short, 2003).

With regard to convenience food, this term refers to any food product that comes out of a packet or a tin or food products convenient to obtain (Carrigan et al., 2006). In their studies, Ritzer (1996) and Fieldhouse, (1995) argued that the rise in women in the waged labour force has created markets for convenience foods and the social trends have moved cooking at home which is from scratch or basic ingredients to a post modern or consumer society that relies on the labour of others with ready prepared foods. Dual income households and busy families or couples with somewhat larger disposable incomes have increased the use of convenience foods (De Boer, McCarthy, Cowen & Ryan, 2004).

## **Time and Economic Factors**

In an attempt to understand the construct of convenience in consumer research, Warde, (1999) revealed that time and timing play an important part in convenience cooking. Yale and Venkatesh (1986) associated convenience goods with savings for the consumers in the time and effort in preparing them. This is linked to more than just the time spent in the kitchen but covers time and effort (mental and physical) spent purchasing, storing, preparing and consuming food (Buckley, Cowan & McCarthy, 2007). Jaffe and Gertler (2006) explained there are even prepared foods for sale that are aimed at all strata of the North American population, from the impoverished to the affluent. British National Opinion Polls (1997) showed that the British public spent less time in the kitchen than their European neighbours and convenience cooking is their alternative. The socio-cultural changes, especially for women in the 1990s, have produced different attitudes and responses to work and family roles, and different consumption strategies and cooking from those in the previous decades are employed (Madill-Marshall et al., 1995). Carrigan and Szmigin (2006) revealed that in spite of their kitchen emancipation and legitimately busy lives, many working women still harbored “guilt trips” by preparing meals from scratch for their families or combining both convenient and home cooked meals.

## **Dietary Practices**

According to Falk et al., (2001), diet has long been recognized as an important contributor to health as well as to the psychological, social and cultural forces specific to the environment. It also influences the food choices and Anderson (2005) added that choices about food consumption are also based on how food is symbolized socially and culturally. Dietary practices and ‘food work’ consequently have considerable potential to engender a greater degree of ambivalence for women than for men (Kiefer et al., 2005). Beardsworth et al. (2002) posited no gender differences in eating as a pleasurable activity but the differences were found in attitudes towards food and nutrition and Charles and Kerr, (1988) and Moisiso et al., (2004) noted that women are primarily responsible right from the procurement, preparation and serving of food. Backett

(1992) and Coveney (2000) argue that women are advancing and recommendations of what the family should eat and dietary practices very much depend on their decision.

Madden and Chamberlain (2010) highlighted that mothers are responsible for food which is related to health, and in daily life mothers will definitely talk about the nutritional value of food as well as dietary practices for their family. A significant number of mothers prepare a proper meal and it becomes a vital part of their symbolic creation for the family (Bugge & Almas, 2006) and such work is regarded as a powerful sign of love and obligation (Lupton, 1996).

## **Working Women and Cooking**

According to Potuchek (1997) the role of women gradually changed when more and more of them ventured into the workforce and made money for the family, unlike before the postmodern era, in line with technology and other circumstances (Bonke, 1996). Many argued that although working women still have household obligations (Levenstein, 1993; Burud and Tumolo, 2004). Ekström (1990), Menell, Murcott and van Otterloo (1992) argued that working women are involved in providing food for the family. According to Moisiso et al., (2004), food plays an important part in the production of family identities and women's characteristics are still connected to household food preparation and their duties of concern (Bugge, 2003).

Devine et al., (2003) articulated that people's eating patterns have altered to a great extent, owing to time restrictions, and most people do not have a lot of free time to cook meals and to prepare foods. Verlegh and Candel, (1999) believed that time pressures on the working women with regard to meal preparation and convenience food reflect a tendency to minimize the time and effort that is put into the preparation of meals. Thompson (1996; 1999) examined working women's experiences of time scarcity due to the mother's working outside the home. Duxbury et al., (2007) highlight the unique challenges faced by families who are simultaneously balancing the demands of two working partners with children at

home. The debate around mothers and food inevitably involves consideration of the morality that pervades any discussion of “homemade versus convenience” (Warde, 1999; Moisio et al., 2004). Carrigan and Szmigin (2006) revealed that in spite of their kitchen emancipation and legitimately busy lives, many women still harboured “guilt trips” by preparing meals from scratch for their families. Qualls, (1987) noted the prevalence of working women outside the home is not only because of the necessity to supplement the family’s income, but is also due to the changes in cultural norms and societal standards. Warde (1999) highlights the conceptual opposition between convenience and care in the context of food preparation. He noted that those who use convenience food are somehow said to be failing in their household duties.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Based on the literature, a few qualitative studies related to women and cooking were found. However, since this research aims to reach a large number of respondents and is looking at the routine of cooking among the working women, a quantitative approach was found to be the most appropriate method to be implemented. In addition, this approach enables the researcher to collect a significant amount of data within a restricted time frame (Ticehurst & Veal, 2005) and also allows the assessment of attitudes, opinions, experience, demographic information, conditions and the characteristics of variables in a situation. Because working women are busy, a self-administered questionnaire would be the best way to gather information from them and full time working women, either those in the government or private sector, aged between 25 and 50 years of age, had a servant and at least one or more children living in the household, were chosen as a sample. Samples were informed that involvement in this research was voluntary and it was further explained that data would be treated as confidential. Without any obvious problem with regard to either the instrument or the data collection process, 334 questionnaires were successfully distributed. All data were then coded and keyed for analysis.



## FINDINGS

### 1. Respondents' Knowledge

In addressing one of the objectives of this paper, four items were used to identify the respondents' knowledge of the meaning of home cooking, convenience cooking, ready cooked food and eating out. The results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: The number and percentage (%) of the overall respondents' knowledge**

| Item No.   | Variables   | All |      |
|--|---|-----|------|
|  |   | n   | %    |
| <b>Q1. What does freshly cooked food (homemade) mean to you?</b>           |   |     |      |
|  | i. Food prepared from scratch with raw ingredients with chosen cooking methods    | 307 | 91.9 |
|  | ii. Food prepared from products either cooked, canned, chilled or frozen.         | 17  | 5.1  |
|  | iii. Ready cooked food ( <i>bungkus/tapau</i> ) bought from restaurants or stalls | 10  | 3.0  |
| <b>Q2. What does ready to cook food (convenience) mean to you?</b>         |   |     |      |
|  | i. Food prepared from scratch with raw ingredients with chosen cooking methods    | 11  | 3.4  |
|  | ii. Food prepared from products either cooked, canned, chilled or frozen.         | 294 | 88.0 |
|  | iii. Ready cooked food ( <i>bungkus/tapau</i> ) bought from restaurants or stalls | 29  | 8.7  |
| <b>Q3. What does ready cooked food (<i>bungkus/tapau</i>) mean to you?</b> |   |     |      |
|  | i. Food prepared from scratch with raw ingredients with chosen cooking methods    | 11  | 3.3  |
|  | ii. Ready cooked food ( <i>bungkus/tapau</i> ) bought from restaurants or stalls  | 313 | 93.7 |
|  | iii. Eating out at a restaurant   | 10  | 3.0  |
| <b>Q4. What does eating out mean to you?</b>                               |   |     |      |
|  | i. Ready cooked food ( <i>bungkus/tapau</i> ) bought from restaurants or stalls   | 16  | 4.8  |
|  | ii. Eating out at a restaurant  | 318 | 95.2 |

From the frequencies test, 91.9 percent (n=307) of the working women in this sample understand home cooking. On convenience food, 88 percent (n=294) understand that this term

refers to food prepared from products either cooked, canned, chilled or frozen. With regard to ready cooked food or *bungkus/tapau*, 93.7 percent (n=313) of the respondents well understood that ready cooked food is food bought from a restaurant or stall. Finally, 95.2 percent, (n=318) well recognized the concept of eating out. This result clearly indicates all working women in this sample well understood the meaning of home cooking, convenience cooking, ready cooked food and eating out.

## 2. Factors Influencing the Routine of Cooking

This section analyzes the factors influencing the routine of cooking among the working women during weekdays which corresponds to the second objective and research question of the study. Three dimensions that might influence the routine of cooking such as time, economy and diet factors were identified. These three dimensions were analyzed accordingly using the descriptive statistics and looking at the mean scores rated by the respondents.

### 2.1 Time Factor

The time factor was the first attribute to be analyzed. Table 2 tabulated the mean scores rated by the women respondents.

**Table 2: Mean Scores of the Time Factor**

| No. | Items   | N   | (M)  | S.D   |
|-----|---|-----|------|-------|
| Q1  | Work time influences my dinner cooking practices during weekdays            | 334 | 3.69 | .781  |
| Q2  | Lack of time influences my dinner cooking practices during weekdays         | 334 | 3.53 | .886  |
| Q3  | Distance of the work place influences the cooking of dinner during weekdays | 334 | 3.67 | .665  |
| Q4  | Too tired to cook my family's dinner  | 334 | 3.59 | .811  |
| Q5  | Lack of time makes me find alternatives for my family's dinner              | 334 | 3.58 | .595  |
| Q6  | Owing to lack of time, I always leave the cooking of dinner to my servant   | 334 | 2.15 | 1.266 |
| Q7  | Working does not affect my cooking of dinner during weekdays                | 334 | 2.30 | .620  |
| Q8  | Despite working, I make a point of cooking                                  | 334 | 2.15 | .571  |

|  |                             |  |  |  |
|--|-----------------------------|--|--|--|
|  | every night during weekdays |  |  |  |
|--|-----------------------------|--|--|--|

Scale: 1=Totally Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Slightly Agree, 4=Agree, 5=Totally Agree

Looking at the table, the majority of the women respondents agreed that work time influenced their dinner cooking practices during weekdays (M= 3.69, Q1). They also agreed that lack of time (M= 3.53, Q2), distance of the work place (M= 3.67, Q3) and being tired (M= 3.59, Q4) also influenced their dinner cooking practices during weekdays. They therefore agreed that they found alternatives for their family’s dinner (M=3.58, Q5). This is best explained by the majority of them disagreeing with leaving the cooking of their family’s dinner to the servant (M=2.15, Q6), disagreeing that working does not affect their cooking of dinner (M= 2.30, Q7) and disagreeing with the statement “Despite working, I make a point of cooking every night during week days” with the mean score (M=2.15,Q8). This result clearly indicates that work time plus other elements positively influence cooking of the family dinner among the working women and some other alternative is their option.

## 2.2 Economy Factor

It was envisaged that besides time, the economic factor would influence the routine of cooking among the working women. With this notion, the seven items used in the instrument are analyzed. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Mean Scores of Economy Factors**

| No. | Items   | N   | (M)  | S.D  |
|-----|---|-----|------|------|
| Q1  | Despite budget constraints, my dinner cooking habits have changed during weekdays   | 334 | 3.64 | .798 |
| Q2  | Despite being a little bit expensive, buying ready cooked food ( <i>bungkus/tapau</i> ) lessens my household duty during weekdays | 334 | 3.58 | .772 |
| Q3  | Despite it saving a lot I cannot afford the time to cook dinner for my family during weekdays                                     | 334 | 3.77 | .837 |
| Q4  | I do not see any reason to buy ready cooked food( <i>bungkus/tapau</i> ) at the restaurant for my family’s dinner during weekdays | 334 | 2.51 | .604 |
| Q5  | I will only buy ready cooked food when I don’t really have time during weekdays   | 334 | 2.39 | .614 |

|    |  |     |      |      |
|----|--|-----|------|------|
| Q6 | Despite having a late dinner, I can save some of my family's expenses if I cook my family's dinner | 334 | 2.92 | .634 |
| Q7 | I can't afford to buy ready cooked food every night  | 334 | 2.69 | .642 |

Scale: 1=Totally Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Slightly Agree, 4=Agree, 5=Totally Agree

Results of the analysis revealed that the majority of the working women in the sample agreed that their dinner cooking habits changed during weekdays, despite budget constraints (M=3.64, Q1). They also agreed that buying ready cooked food (*bungkus/tapau*) lessened their household duty during weekdays despite being a little bit expensive (M= 3.58, Q2) and they cannot afford the time to cook dinner during weekdays despite it saving a lot of money (M=3.77, Q3). These indicate that despite budget constraints the routine of cooking among the women changed during their working days. This is evident when they disagreed with the other four items. These items are as follows:

- I do not see any reason to buy ready cooked food(*bungkus/tapau*) at the restaurant for my family's dinner during weekdays (M=2.51, Q4)
- I will only buy ready cooked food when I don't really have time during weekdays (M=2.39, Q5)
- Despite having a late dinner, I can save some of my family's expenses if cook my family dinner (M=2.92, Q6)
- I can't afford to buy ready cooked food every night (M=2.69, Q7)

## 2.3 Diet Factors

Another factor that might influence the routine of cooking among the working women during weekdays is the dietary factor. Again, the descriptive statistic looking at the mean score was used against six items in the instrument. The results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Mean Scores of the Diet Factors**

| Item No. | Items   | N   | (M)  | S.D  |
|----------|---|-----|------|------|
| Q1       | My family dinner dietary practices change during weekdays   | 334 | 3.51 | .730 |
| Q2       | My family will take any food for dinner during weekdays   | 334 | 3.70 | .689 |
| Q3       | Although it is my responsibility to keep my family healthy, my family's dietary practices alter during weekdays | 334 | 3.61 | .720 |
| Q4       | Although homemade cooking is more nutritious, I cannot afford to do it on working days                          | 334 | 3.56 | .840 |
| Q5       | I have more confidence in freshly cooked food/homemade food than in other food products                         | 334 | 2.75 | .791 |
| Q6       | My family dislike anything that might change their eating habits during weekdays                                | 334 | 2.99 | .627 |

**Scale: 1=Totally Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Slightly Agree, 4=Agree, 5=Totally Agree**

The result revealed that the majority of the respondents or working women in this study agreed that their family dinner dietary practices changed during weekdays (M= 3.51, Q1). This feelings is perhaps best explained when they agreed their family will take any food for dinner during weekdays (M=3.70, Q2). This is further supported as they also agreed their family's dietary practices altered during weekdays although it is their responsibility (M= 3.61, Q3) and agreed that although they could not afford the time to do it on working days, they believed their home cooking was more nutritious (M=3.56, Q4). The changes in their dietary practices were further strengthened when the majority of them disagreed with the items "I have more confidence in freshly cooked food/homemade food than other food products" and "My family dislikes anything that might change their eating habits during weekdays" with the mean score (M= 2.75, Q5) for the former item and (M=2.99, Q6) for the latter.

## CONCLUSION

It was apparent and obvious that more than 80 percent of the working women in the sample comprehended or well understood the meaning of home cooking, ready cooked food (*bungkus/tapau*) and eating out. This result indicated that the working women in the sample are knowledgeable and familiar with all the terms and it also fitted well with the majority of the respondents' level of education.

On the whole, the three factors (time, economic and dietary) clearly influenced the routine of cooking the family dinner among the working women. On the time factor, they agreed that lack of time, distance from the work place and exhaustion influenced their dinner cooking practices. Thus, they found alternatives for their family dinner as the majority of them do not like to leave the family dinner cooking to their servant.

The economic factor through budget constraints does not contribute to frequent dinner cooking among the working women during weekdays. This is evident from the majority of the respondents or working women in this sample agreeing that buying ready cooked food (*bungkus/tapau*) lessens their household duty during weekdays, despite it being a little bit more expensive and clearly expressed that they cannot afford the time to cook dinner during weekdays despite it saving a lot of money.

In addition, the working women's family diet through cooking practices was also changed. This was supported when the majority of the working women in this study agreed that their family will take any food for dinner during weekdays and admitted that their family's dietary practices altered during weekday, although family dinner cooking was their responsibility.

It is no exaggeration to say that paid work is becoming a necessity and one of the most important elements in this modern era for bachelors and family couples in coping with economic needs. Working women need to sacrifice many things including one of the most crucial household responsibilities, which is cooking.

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