

Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being Among Cafeteria Workers in the UAE: Associations with Working Hours and Weekly Leave

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Abstract: *This quantitative descriptive and correlational study examined mental health and psychological well-being among cafeteria workers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with particular attention to daily working hours and weekly leave. Data were obtained from 93 cafeteria workers through a structured questionnaire containing seven GHQ-based mental-health items, six Ryff-based positive well-being items, five work-condition items, and three open-ended questions. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Spearman correlations, Welch independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and a Kruskal-Wallis sensitivity analysis. The sample showed substantial occupational distress: the seven-item mental-distress composite had a mean of 3.46 on a 1–4 scale, while the six-item positive well-being composite had a mean of 2.06 on a 1–5 scale. Most respondents (82.8%) reported working more than 12 hours per day, and 93.5% reported no weekly leave. Daily working-hour category was positively associated with mental distress ($p = .289$, $p = .005$). Weekly leave was associated with psychological well-being in the Spearman analysis ($p = .208$, $p = .045$), but the weekly-leave group contained only six respondents and the Welch comparison was not statistically significant. Evidence for an association between working hours and psychological well-being was inconsistent across statistical procedures. The findings indicate substantial reported occupational distress in the collected sample, while the cross-sectional design, non-probability sampling, and adapted questionnaire limit causal and population-level conclusions.*

Keywords: cafeteria workers; occupational mental health; psychological well-being; UAE; working hours; weekly leave

1. Introduction

Occupational mental health is closely related to workers' emotional functioning, concentration, sleep, interpersonal relationships, motivation, and ability to cope with everyday demands. Work can provide income, structure, social connection, and a sense of purpose, but excessive demands and inadequate recovery opportunities may increase psychological strain. Cafeteria workers perform essential service-sector activities involving food preparation, cleaning, customer interaction, repetitive tasks, time pressure, and prolonged standing. When working hours are extended and recovery time is limited, workers may experience fatigue and difficulty maintaining personal and family life.

The UAE has a diverse service-sector workforce, including migrant workers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Working schedules, employer support, accommodation, social support, and opportunities for family contact may shape workers' psychological experiences. The present study focused specifically on cafeteria workers and examined self-reported mental distress and psychological well-being in relation to daily working hours and weekly leave.

The study was informed primarily by the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, which proposes that demanding work conditions can consume physical and psychological resources, whereas resources such as rest, supportive supervision, and adequate staffing can help workers cope. Long working hours and limited leave were therefore considered occupational demands and recovery-related conditions rather than direct causes of psychological outcomes.

2. Objectives

The study aimed to: (1) assess the reported mental health status of cafeteria workers in the UAE; (2) evaluate their psychological well-being; (3) examine the relationship between weekly-leave status and mental health and psychological well-being; (4) examine relationships between daily working hours and psychological outcomes; and (5) identify common occupational challenges and suggested workplace improvements reported by workers.

3. Method

A quantitative, descriptive, and correlational design was used. Participants were adults working in cafeterias in the UAE. Purposive and convenience sampling yielded 93 usable responses. The sample included 5 participants aged 18–25 years, 25 aged 26–35 years, 25 aged 36–45 years, and 38 aged 46–60 years. Sixty-five participants (69.9%) reported more than five years of work experience. Seventy-seven (82.8%) reported working more than 12 hours per day, while 87 (93.5%) reported receiving no weekly leave.

The questionnaire contained demographic questions, seven GHQ-based mental-health items, six Ryff-based positive well-being items, five work-condition items, and three open-ended questions. Mental-health items were rated from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always), with higher scores indicating more frequent distress symptoms. Positive well-being items were rated from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating stronger positive well-being. The study used selected/adapted items rather than the complete GHQ-12 or the complete Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale.

Descriptive statistics included frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha. Spearman correlation was used for ordinal/categorical work-schedule variables. Welch's independent-samples t-test compared respondents with and without weekly leave because of the highly unequal group sizes. One-way ANOVA compared outcomes across working-hour categories, followed by a Kruskal–Wallis sensitivity analysis. Open-ended responses were reviewed using simple keyword grouping as an exploratory supplementary procedure.

Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were intended to be maintained, and the project did not use questionnaire scores to make clinical diagnoses.

4. Results

The seven mental-health items produced an overall mean of 3.46 (SD = 0.84) on the 1–4 scale. Frequent distress-related experiences were reported across stress, difficulty relaxing, low mood, sleep difficulty, emotional exhaustion, concentration difficulty, and feeling overwhelmed by work. For example, 71.0% of respondents selected “Always” for feeling constantly under stress, while 68.8% selected “Always” for difficulty relaxing and 68.8% for feeling overwhelmed by work.

The six positive psychological well-being items produced an overall mean of 2.06 (SD = 1.11) on the 1–5 scale. The item means ranged from 1.81 for life satisfaction to 2.38 for relationships with others. These results indicate generally low endorsement of positive well-being statements within the collected sample.

The mental-health item set showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .978$), while the positive well-being item set also showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .930$). These coefficients apply to the collected item sets and should not be interpreted as reliability estimates for the full standardized GHQ-12 or Ryff scales.

Daily working-hour category was positively associated with mental distress (Spearman $\rho = .289$, $p = .005$). The relationship between working-hour category and psychological well-being was not statistically significant in the Spearman analysis ($\rho = -.127$, $p = .224$). Weekly-leave status was not significantly associated with mental distress ($\rho = -.180$, $p = .083$), but it was associated with psychological well-being in the Spearman analysis ($\rho = .208$, $p = .045$). Because only six respondents reported weekly leave, this finding requires caution.

The Welch comparison between workers without weekly leave and workers with weekly leave was not statistically significant for mental distress, $t = 1.51$, $p = .185$, or psychological well-being, $t = -1.78$, $p = .129$. The descriptive means nevertheless showed lower distress (3.50 versus 2.88) and higher well-being (2.00 versus 2.92) among the small weekly-leave group.

One-way ANOVA indicated significant differences across working-hour categories for mental distress, $F = 6.36$, $p =$

.003, and psychological well-being, $F = 3.98$, $p = .022$. However, because the working-hour groups were highly unequal, the Kruskal–Wallis sensitivity analysis was considered important. It supported the mental-distress finding ($H = 11.76$, $p = .003$) but did not confirm a significant difference in psychological well-being ($H = 4.17$, $p = .124$).

The exploratory open-ended responses repeatedly mentioned long hours, workload, stress, fatigue, sleep difficulties, lack of rest, and requests for weekly leave. Among suggested improvements, recurring topics included weekly leave, reduced stress and fatigue, shorter working hours, improved communication, workload reduction, family/personal-life considerations, and salary or compensation.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate substantial reported psychological distress among the surveyed cafeteria workers. The high mean for the seven-item mental-distress measure and frequent reports of stress, difficulty relaxing, sleep problems, emotional exhaustion, concentration difficulty, and feeling overwhelmed provide a consistent descriptive picture of occupational strain in this sample. The findings are compatible with the JD-R model because long working hours and workload can function as job demands, while rest, weekly leave, supportive supervision, and adequate staffing can function as resources.

The strongest inferential finding concerned working hours. Longer working-hour categories were positively associated with mental distress, and both ANOVA and the Kruskal–Wallis sensitivity analysis identified significant group differences in distress. Because the study was cross-sectional, however, the association cannot establish that longer working hours caused mental distress. Other unmeasured factors may also contribute.

The evidence concerning weekly leave was more mixed. Weekly-leave status showed a statistically significant association with positive psychological well-being in the Spearman analysis, but the comparison involved only six workers who reported weekly leave. The Welch t-test did not show a statistically significant group difference. Therefore, the result should be regarded as preliminary rather than as evidence of a causal effect of weekly leave.

Evidence regarding working hours and psychological well-being was also inconsistent. The conventional ANOVA was statistically significant, whereas the Spearman correlation and Kruskal–Wallis sensitivity analysis were not. This inconsistency indicates that stronger conclusions would require larger and more balanced samples, exact working-hour measurements, and validated standardized measures.

The workers' own comments provide useful contextual information. Repeated references to long hours, overtime, workload, stress, fatigue, lack of rest, and requests for weekly leave complement the quantitative findings. Nevertheless, the open-ended responses were analysed using simple keyword grouping rather than a formal qualitative

methodology, so they should be interpreted as supplementary descriptive evidence.

6. Implications and Recommendations

The findings have several practical implications for occupational well-being. Organizations employing cafeteria workers may consider reviewing working-hour schedules, workload distribution, staffing arrangements, and opportunities for predictable recovery time. Supportive communication between supervisors and workers may also help workers communicate concerns about fatigue, stress, and workload. Confidential mental-health awareness and referral information may be useful for workers experiencing persistent distress.

Based on the findings, organizations may consider: (1) encouraging reasonable working-hour schedules and adequate recovery opportunities; (2) providing predictable weekly rest or leave arrangements where operationally possible; (3) reviewing workload distribution; (4) strengthening communication channels for occupational concerns; (5) training supervisors in supportive and respectful communication; (6) improving staffing or task-sharing arrangements; and (7) conducting periodic anonymous employee well-being surveys.

These recommendations should be implemented in accordance with applicable UAE labour requirements and organizational policies and should be evaluated empirically rather than assumed to be effective.

7. Limitations

The study has several limitations. The sample of 93 respondents was obtained through purposive/convenience sampling, limiting generalizability. The weekly-leave comparison included only six respondents with weekly leave, producing substantial group imbalance. Working-hour categories were also highly unequal. The questionnaire used selected/adapted GHQ-based and Ryff-based items rather than the complete standardized instruments. Exact continuous working hours were not collected, and the “more than 12 hours” category required approximation for one statistical calculation. The cross-sectional design does not establish temporal or causal relationships. Finally, open-ended responses were analysed through exploratory keyword grouping rather than a formal qualitative methodology, and several potentially relevant confounding variables were not fully controlled.

8. Conclusion

This study examined mental health and psychological well-being among 93 cafeteria workers in the UAE. The collected sample was characterized by a high concentration of very long working hours and limited weekly leave. Mental-distress responses were frequent, while positive psychological well-being responses were generally low. The most consistent inferential finding was a positive association between working-hour category and mental distress. Evidence concerning weekly leave and psychological well-being was suggestive but limited by the very small leave

group, while evidence concerning working hours and well-being was inconsistent across statistical methods. Overall, the study provides an empirical basis for further research and organizational discussion concerning working hours, recovery opportunities, workplace support, and occupational mental health among cafeteria workers.

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