

# Barriers to Flexible Working for Indian Women Professionals: A Cross Industry Study

Dr. Saundarya Rajesh

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## Abstract

Flexible working refers to those working arrangements that are significantly different from regular work patterns. It allows employees to choose his/her place or time of work by exploiting the technological advancements that makes it possible to connect to work virtually without having to commute to office and/or do so during hours of the day that suits a particular employee. While men and women can be beneficiaries of such flexible working arrangements, it is the Woman Professional who is also more often expected to be responsible for child care, elder care and household duties and to whom the choice of working flexibly serves as a critical enabler and sustainer of her career. This cross industry study brings to light the barriers that mar the successful implementation of flexible working policies in Indian Corporate offices. It was found that the challenges to flexible working in could be broadly classified as 1) Cultural 2) Infrastructural and 3) Attitudinal. The findings of the study helped us conclude that the ingraining of flexible working in an organization's work culture calls for concerted effort from the employers?, the women professionals? and their families? end.

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**Index terms**— barrier, career enabler, flexible working arrangements (FWAs), indian women professionals (IWPs), telecommuting.

## 1 Introduction

he intricate association between an average Indian Woman Professional (IWP) and organizational policies that address the unique needs she brings along by virtue of being a woman, leads the social researcher on to a way of work that is transforming the corporate landscape -Flexible Working. With the advent of connective technology that revolutionized the way the world works more so after the turn of last century, flexible working has garnered the attention of policy makers and thought leaders across the globe. It encompasses all working arrangements that allows the concerned employee to choose his/her time and place of work while executing professional commitments with the aid of virtual communication if need be. For e.g. an employee could choose to work from home accessing his/her corporate network through secure systems and be present physically in office only under circumstances that does not offer alternatives for face time.

Irrespective of the country or the culture it is the woman professional who is more in need of work flexibility. This is because, from time immemorial women have been considered primarily responsible for household duties with the institution of marriage adding new dimensions to their baggage of natural responsibilities such as child care, elder care and overall care of a new family. India is no exception and in the Indian socio cultural milieu women continue to be expected to fulfill their domestic commitments even while making commendable strides at the career front. In such a context, patterns of flexible work are of great relevance to the community of employed Indian women as they offer them greater autonomy over their schedules and enable their attempts to do commendable justice to the dual roles of a professional and a homemaker simultaneously.

Now, let us address the case of an average IWP. According to a 2012 study (Inderfurth & Khambatta, 2012), although women constitute 24% of the workforce in urban India, only 5% of senior level executives in Indian organizations are women as against a global average of 20%. Furthermore, according to the 2011 gender diversity benchmarking report for Asia released by Community Business Org, most Indian women who quit corporate

### 3 FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS: DIFFERENT FLAVOURS

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45 jobs did so while they were between the junior and middle management levels in their organizations (Gender  
46 Diversity Benchmarking Report, Asia 2011, 2011). According to yet another research, almost 48% of urban  
47 Indian women quit work before they reach the middle of their careers with the Asian average for this figure being  
48 29% (Inderfurth & Khambatta, 2012). This could be because the career motives and the career trajectory of  
49 an average Indian man and woman are starkly different. A study by AVTAR Career Creators and Outlook in  
50 2010 (Outlook Business -AVTAR Work Life Balance Survey, 2010) showed that Indian women were very much in  
51 need of work flexibility soon after becoming mothers. In a recent survey of Indian Women Professionals by the  
52 professional networking site LinkedIn, it was found that 60% of them felt that they will slow down their careers  
53 once they have children (Indian women prefer more flexibility at workplace: LinkedIn, 2013). These disturbing  
54 and dismal numbers can be rewritten if organizations and the society recognize the role of work flexibility in  
55 sustaining the careers of IWPs. Women can balance their professional and personal commitments gracefully and  
56 avoid career breaks in the process.

57 Advocates of flexi-working world over have devoted their time to understand the various hurdles that flexi  
58 workers need to cross in order to be smoothly integrated to their workplace. While some of the barriers to  
59 successful implementation of flexi work are due to indifference within the organization, the others are because  
60 of lack of sufficient effort on the part of the employee, found a recent study (College). According to them,  
61 some of the concerns that employers of flexible workers had in common were moderate/great extent about abuse  
62 of policies, the reactions of customers and clients, difficulties with supervising employees working in a flexible  
63 manner, resentment of coworkers, loss of productivity etc. Yet another 2012 report stated that organizations  
64 were not completely ready to take the risk of enabling a flexible culture that might require continuous  
65 innovation from them (The Benefits of Flexible Working Arrangements, 2012). In a recent research commissioned  
66 by Microsoft it was found that employees who wanted to work flexibly, were concerned about their coworkers  
67 perception of their operational effectiveness while working flexibly (Flexible working in businesses being 'held  
68 back by cultural barriers', 2013). They were also held back by the lack of trust from their organizations on  
69 their ability to get jobs done remotely. A study in UK found that the lack of consistent and strong messages  
70 to employers about the business benefits of flexible working by way of a coherent and compelling narrative on  
71 the same was what was primarily stopping the amalgamation of flexibility into popular work culture (Stewart  
72 & Rowlett, 2009). A 2008 survey showed that expense of implementation and start up costs associated with  
73 FWAs further retarded an organization's will to initiate policies to this end (Leach, 2008). A fresh perspective  
74 on the barriers to telecommuting on the basis of place, time and distance between/ of the components of a  
75 telecommuting system was presented in (Brewer, 2000).

76 As any system is prone to friction while adapting to a futuristic style, the Indian Corporate Sector has also  
77 not been able to completely accommodate and nurture the culture of flexible working. This could be because the  
78 typical career model was created keeping in mind the male, who with a full time homemaker to support, can rise  
79 in the corporate ranks with single minded focus on his career. While most of the studies discussed previously  
80 were gender neutral, the research detailed in this paper aims to understand the barriers specific to Indian Women  
81 Professionals that they face while trying to avail of flexible working options. These barriers identified and studied  
82 can be broadly classified as 1) Cultural 2) Infrastructural 3) Attitudinal.

83 The cultural blockades to the reign of flexible working include the Indian society's and its professional network's  
84 inability to welcome this alternative culture of work owing to their strong affinity for the 'presenteeism' [1]  
85 culture. Also, majority of Indian organizations have not been able to integrate work flexibility smoothly into  
86 their organizational culture as there are very few successful role models who have proved their mettle by ways of  
87 flexible working.

88 Infrastructural barriers constitute the lack of infrastructural provisions such as those for virtual communication  
89 which are vital to most flexi working arrangements. Many organizations are also not keen on operating on hours  
90 out of the normal 9-6 schedule that could benefit part time / flexi time workers. Many women professionals do  
91 not push themselves to their best to acquire skills that could make FWAs a successful pattern of work. Also,  
92 Human Resource personnel in many organizations feel that granting requests for flexible working requires some  
93 additional effort on their parts to tailor the office culture to accommodate such ways of work and hence find it  
94 problematic.

95 Attitude that is rebellious to the changing culture of work further also comes in the way of flexible working.  
96 Many managers feel that flexible working speaks of under performance of the employee availing it. Resentful  
97 attitude of full time workers stemming from their lack of sensitization on the needs and benefits of flexible working  
98 further reduces the acceptance levels for such arrangements.

99 The flow of this research paper is as follows: A preliminary discussion on the different flavors of flexible working  
100 is followed by a detailed description of our research methodology. The heart of the paper which is the key findings  
101 of this study is the next section. This is wrapped up through discussions. Conclusions drawn are presented in  
102 the section after this. In the last section, the future of this work is outlined.

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## 103 2 II.

### 104 3 Flexible Working Arrangements: Different Flavours

105 Flexible working arrangements refer to those working patterns different from the normal working patterns; they  
106 can involve changes to the hours an employee works, the times they are required to work or their places of work.  
107 With the kind of technological advancement that the world has witnessed, one can afford the luxury of working  
108 remotely from any part of the world during any time of the day. Some of the most popular flexible working  
109 arrangements amongst employees, world over are: Part-time work: requires employees to work a lower number  
110 of hours than would be considered full time by their employer Telecommuting: employees do not commute to a  
111 central place of work, they can work from home or from any remote location as long as they are connected to  
112 work virtually Flexi-time arrangement: requires employees to be at work during a specified core period, but lets  
113 them otherwise arrange their hours to suit themselves Year ( )

### 114 4 ( )

115 Compressed work hours: employees work the same number of hours, over fewer days Staggered hours contract:  
116 employees can start and finish work at different times Annual hours contract: employers and employees agree  
117 they will work a given number of hours during the year, but the pattern of work can vary from week to week Job  
118 sharing: one job is shared between two people, who might work alternate days, half weeks, or alternate weeks,  
119 or one person working in the morning and one in the afternoon Term-time work: is an arrangement whereby an  
120 employee is contracted to work a particular number of weeks per year on either a full or part-time basis. His/her  
121 non-working time is scheduled at regular, planned periods which are accounted for by a combination of annual  
122 leave and unpaid leave. Designated working weeks will normally coincide with school terms.

## 123 5 III.

### 124 6 Research Methodology

125 The foundation for this research was a questionnaire that required women professionals to share their views on  
126 various aspects of flexible working. Women belonging to different age groups and based out of cities/towns all  
127 over India took the survey. These IWPs also had remarkably different socio, economic and educational profiles  
128 which increased the study sample diversity. This included women working at various levels of the organizations  
129 from junior managers to the CEOs, some of them who had used flexible working at critical junctures in their  
130 lives. While some of these professionals were on career breaks, others had enviable, uninterrupted careers and a  
131 few others were en route successful second innings in their careers.

132 A total of 1060 women took part in the survey. The majority (45%) fell in the age bracket 26 to 35 followed  
133 by 21% of IWPs aged 21-25 years and 19% of IWPs aged 36 -45 years. 6% were women aged above 46 and  
134 1% below the age of 20. Majority of the women aged 26 and above were married. 26% of women came from  
135 households having an annual income between 5 to 10 lakhs and another 26% had family incomes between 3 to 5  
136 lakhs. As for their educational backgrounds, 27% of IWPs surveys held professional post graduate degrees, 26 %  
137 were graduates, another 23 % were professional graduates, 10% were diploma holders, 9% were post graduates  
138 and 6% held doctoral degrees or equivalent. While 73% of them were currently working full time, 13% of them  
139 were working flexibly. 54% of these IWPs had a work experience of 5 years or less, 22% have been working for  
140 almost 10 years whereas only 3% of the participants had a total work experience amounting to 20 years plus.  
141 27% of the IWPs surveyed were associated with the IT industry, 14% were HR managers and 10% worked in the  
142 finance and accounts department of their organizations. The distribution of the women workforce (who took the  
143 survey) across industries is as shown in Figure 1.

### 144 7 Key Findings

145 The major findings of this study are presented in this section. Analyses on the responses of women showed  
146 that the path to flexible working in the current corporate ecosystem was not entirely smooth. There were three  
147 significant classes of barriers that characterized the paths to work flexibility of women professionals at different  
148 points in their careers. These were 1) Cultural barriers 2) Infrastructural barriers 3) Attitudinal barriers. The  
149 impacts of each of these barriers on the careers of women employed in different industries were studied in great  
150 detail. An insightful understanding as to how women professionals at different levels of the corporate hierarchy  
151 reacted to problems women faced while attempting to work flexibly is also elaborated.

#### 152 8 a) Cultural barriers to flexible working

153 As can be seen from Table 1, the most common cultural barrier that came in the way of an IWP's path to work  
154 flexibility was the lack of successful role models who climbed up the corporate ladder while being a flexi-worker  
155 for a large part of their professional journeys. 32% of women professionals in the IT sector and 63% of those  
156 who were consultants felt that in the absence of women who made it work 'flexibly', they did not have anyone  
157 to look up to and were discouraged to even make attempts to negotiate flexible working with their respective  
158 employers. It is upto the few fortunate women leaders of today who were beneficiaries of flexibility to showcase

## 9 B) INFRASTRUCTURAL BARRIERS

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159 and propagate their success stories so that the women professionals who are now at the threshold of their careers  
160 have paths worth emulating. The second biggest barrier under this category was the lack of a flexible culture in  
161 the women professionals' organizations. A large proportion of women who undertook this survey felt that when  
162 organizational policies were hostile to the concept of flexibility they found it difficult to negotiate and obtain  
163 flexibility from their employers. Agreement of 46% women in the banking sector and 27% in ITES to the threat  
164 posed by this barrier is evidence enough. If organizations in the Indian corporate sector were to pay attention to  
165 this fact and welcome the wave of work flexibility, they would be able to tap the potentials of the women on their  
166 rolls to the fullest possible extent. The third and the last very common cultural barrier to flexible working that  
167 IWPs employed in sectors as diverse as IT and manufacturing reported was the presentee-ism expectation of their  
168 supervisors and others. Almost 50% of women in the manufacturing industry and 36% of women in the telecom  
169 industry felt that their managers strongly believed that to operate efficiently, they need to be present physically at  
170 office during what is considered normal working hours. Many women surveyed were of the opinion that not only  
171 their line managers but also their circle of friends and family considered them to be less serious about their jobs  
172 while working flexibly, possibly because of their reluctance to accept a culture of work that defies the centuries'  
173 old norm of being present in office when employed formally. It was only in the consulting sector that women did  
174 not feel much threatened by such mindsets (only around 5% women counted this as a barrier) probably because  
175 of their nature of work that offered an amount of inherent flexibility. The results are thus indicative of the fact  
176 that a change at the very roots of our society's work culture is required in enabling IWPs plot impressive career  
177 graphs with the aid of flexibility. In table 2 are shown the attitudes of women professionals at different levels of  
178 management (from junior management to Leadership positions) to cultural barriers of flexible working. It might  
179 be interesting to note that 42% of women who have made it to the top and are currently corporate leaders feel  
180 it is the lack of a flexible culture that was a major stumbling block that they encountered. A good number of  
181 women in the junior and middle management levels felt their managers (both men and women) expected them  
182 to be present at office and work under their supervision. Seldom were these managers sympathetic to their need  
183 for flexibility to the extent that this barrier was career threatening. As women rose higher up in the ranks their  
184 quests for the right pattern of flexible work were often deterred by the lack of successful women leaders who had  
185 used flexibility at vital points in their career trajectories. They were unsure of their ability to make it big if they  
186 opted for work flexibility. 41% of women in senior positions and 42% of women in leadership roles shared this  
187 opinion.

188 From the findings, it may be concluded that a paradigm shift in the work culture of organizations should be  
189 called for in order to create successful women professionals who are ambassadors of flexibility.

### 190 9 b) Infrastructural barriers

191 The two major barriers in this category faced by IWPs wanting to work flexibly as found by this study were  
192 a) The lack of infrastructural support from their organizations and b) The misconception on the side of HR &  
193 Administration department that granting such requests on a case basis would be highly problematic. As can be  
194 seen in table 3, 13% of women professionals who are in the Information & Technology domain felt that their  
195 organizations did not seem very inclined to extend the additional infrastructural support required to make flexible  
196 working a successful model of work. The risk associated with letting employees access confidential data from  
197 remote locations (primarily owing to a lack of trust on the concerned employee) could be what stops corporate  
198 offices from adapting infrastructure favoring the flexibility wave. Also, many organizations are reluctant to  
199 restructure their working hours to suit the needs of women employees especially those with caring responsibilities  
200 who might want to come in early and leave early. In this day and age of virtual communication where technology  
201 is literally taking the workplace by storm, it is desired that organizations invest on the components of a flexible  
202 office, for e.g by providing secured access to official accounts to productive women personnel who might benefit  
203 from it. The women on their part should act responsible on the usage of data and resources pertaining to their  
204 respective organizations and thus prove themselves worthy of this working arrangement.

205 Almost 17% of employed women in the IT enabled services said their requests for flexible working often met  
206 with a lukewarm response from their HR departments as many HR managers felt granting such requests on  
207 a case basis is problematic and generates additional overheads for them. This could probably be because HR  
208 managers who are generally the advisors of policy makers in most organizations feel that it is difficult to evaluate  
209 the genuinity of requests for flexi work from women employees. Also, as streamlining and implementing such  
210 requests might call for changes in the clauses of certain administrative procedures of the organizations, managers  
211 are not fully convinced of the need for the same. They could also be held back by the fact that granting such  
212 requests might set unfair standards in the company, wherein male and female employees are treated differently.  
213 Our study recommends that the severity of this barrier can be reduced if HR professionals, led by the women  
214 amongst them discuss / debate and reach a consensus on organizational policies related to flexible working and  
215 hand a fair deal to valuable women employees who are much in need of it. It could be a matter of a few years  
216 that such requests are executed with commendable ease just as routine requests for maternity leaves. It can  
217 be inferred from Table 4 that infrastructural barriers prove to be no serious threats to women in the higher  
218 echelons of management. It is women who are at the junior and middle management levels who stumble upon  
219 such obstacles. The few who have been able to work their way up the ladder are able to have their way with  
220 flexibility often because of their power and position in their organizations and because the organization values

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221 their contributions. However junior women (almost 12% of them) opined that infrastructural support from  
222 their companies that could enable them to work flexibly was scarce indeed. This prompted many of them to  
223 contemplate quitting work even when they did not want to, as their employers were insensitive to their need  
224 for work-family integration. 5% of IWPs who were junior managers or below and on whom this research was  
225 conducted were of the opinion that all their attempts to negotiate flexibility fell on deaf ears as HR personnel  
226 were not ready to take the extra effort required to accept these requests. The onus is now on the women leaders of  
227 today's corporate India to initiate a welcome change to this end that can help retain supremely talented women  
228 professionals on the career track even when their lives outside of work are extremely demanding of them. While  
229 infrastructural and cultural barriers had come in the way of the dream of a flexible career for many an IWP,  
230 another major class of deterrents were the attitudinal barriers. When employees who prefer the conventional  
231 style of work (full time) view flexible or part time work as underperformance, women employees struggling with  
232 the juggling pressure of managing work and home are discouraged from opting for flexibility. They harbor the  
233 fear of being alienated at the workplace and being considered inefficient. For many IWPs who find themselves  
234 in such a scenario, quitting work appears easier than pushing their requests for flexibility. Almost 7% of women  
235 employed in varied industrial divisions agree that they have faced this barrier while they evolved to being a  
236 flexi-worker. The resentful attitude of full-time co-workers could be attributed to their inability to make minor  
237 adjustments to accommodate their team-mate's flexible schedule. It could also be because they misconstrue the  
238 granting of requests for flexibility to certain employees as unequal treatment meted out by their managements.  
239 This research points out that if all employees in a particular organization decide to accept the importance of work  
240 flexibility and its ability to alter the career paths of Indian Women Professionals, it could bring a huge change  
241 in the productivity of the women workforce engaged in various trades across India. Another significant barrier  
242 of this type was a lack of support from the top management of a company for this all-important women's career  
243 enabler. The thought leaders and policy makers of many organizations in the country tend to ignore the urgency  
244 associated with formalizing flexible working while focusing on achieving competitive business targets. The fact  
245 that only a handful of women are in the top managements of firms across India also could be a reason for this  
246 lack of awareness and sensitivity. In the typical corporate career model that suits the career paths of Indian men  
247 perfectly, work flexibility as a policy fails to garner attention. 36% of women in the travel and hospitality sector  
248 felt that this barrier had derailed their journeys to flexibility. As can be understood from table 6, the cultural  
249 barriers to flexible working cease to exist when women rise up in corporate ranks. It is those at the initial stages  
250 of their careers who are more likely to encounter insensitive reactions from their colleagues to their need to work  
251 flexibly. Around 10% of IWPs at the junior and middle management levels voiced their concern over the resentful  
252 attitudes of their co-workers when they work flexibly. It could be that at junior levels, professionals are least  
253 likely to enjoy total autonomy over their schedules, targets or deadlines and it is required of them to contribute  
254 effectively to their respective teams by being physically present. Their voices go mostly unheard and their  
255 subordinates find it easier to complete work without having to make adjustments to fit in the flexible routines of  
256 their female co-workers. Another 8% of women of the entry level workforce felt that their managements were not  
257 positively oriented towards work flexibility. The lukewarm responses that their requests to be granted flexibility  
258 received owing to the management's lack of interest in initiating policies for the same came in their way to career  
259 sustainability through flexibility. When women are at senior levels and are directly connected to policy makers of  
260 their organizations, the urgency associated with their requests is more pronounced and these requests are more  
261 often accepted. If corporate leaders especially women who have successfully negotiated and used work flexibility  
262 at earlier stages of their careers, pioneer its cause, it can provide the much needed impetus to the younger women  
263 attempting to navigate their careers flexibly.

## 264 10 Industry

## 265 11 Industry

## 266 12 Conclusions

267 The study which was conducted amongst women performing vastly different job functions and at markedly  
268 different career junctures helped us arrive at some insightful conclusions on the stumbling blocks that characterize  
269 an average Indian Woman Professional's path to flexible working. 43% of the research subjects opined that  
270 it was the lack of successful women role models who worked their way up flexibly that stopped them from  
271 embracing this culture of work. The second most imposing barrier was the lack of infrastructural support at  
272 an IWP's organization that would have enabled work flexibility. This research also found that when managers  
273 of women employees viewed working flexibly as an act of underperformance, it further diminished the prospects  
274 of career growth for these women. Almost 30% of women felt that in the absence of formal flexible working  
275 policies at their respective organizations, it was impossible to ingrain this way of work in the organizational  
276 culture. The absence of support and enablement from the top management, resentful attitudes of peers and  
277 lack of sensitivity to a woman's need to work flexibly were the other significant deterrents. While infrastructural  
278 improvement and employee sensitization to create a culture of flexible work, calls for investment of time, money  
279 and effort at the organizations' end, the onus is on the corporate society and women themselves to welcome work  
280 flexibility shunning all apprehensions regarding its effectiveness. It is also desired that the families of the women

281 professionals wholeheartedly encourage this new architecture of work and give due respect to the professional  
282 contributions made by these women. Together, India Inc. could march forward to an empowered, gender balanced  
283 workforce tomorrow VI.

### 284 13 Future Work

285 The future course of this research is to understand how each of these barriers to flexible working can be overcome.  
286 Sensitizing the corporate community on the urgency associated with this provision is also on our agenda. As  
287 social scientists striving to increase the labor force participation rate of urban women in India, we aim to pave  
288 the way to institutionalizing work flexibility in India.

### 289 14 VII.

### 290 15 Notes

291 Presentee-ism culture -The work culture in which an employee is required to be physically present in his/her  
292 office during formal working hours. [m.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/The-Benefits-of-Flexible-Working-Arrangements-for-CEOs.pdf](http://m.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/The-Benefits-of-Flexible-Working-Arrangements-for-CEOs.pdf) <sup>1</sup>



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Figure 1: Figure 1 :

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Education		20.00%	24.00%	40.00%	0.
Others		0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.
Total		19.01%	23.55%	27.27%	1.
Consulting	Advertising	5.26%	26.32%	63.16%	0.
Media &		10.00%	50.00%	30.00%	0.
FMCG /	Consumer Goods	0.00%	60.00%	0.00%	0.
Banking,	Financial Services & Insurance	5.4%	46.15%	11.54%	0.
IT ITES BPO		25.97%	16.88%	32.47%	1.
/ Telecom	Hospital-	27.78%	5.56%	22.22%	0.
Travel &	ity	36.36%	27.27%	27.27%	0.
Retail Man-	ufacturing	12.00%	16.00%	24.00%	0.
/	Engineering	50.00%	16.67%	0.00%	0.
		50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	0.

Industry

Barriers to the presence of women in the workforce of a culture within the organization successful in which women have played a role in modernized work environments

Figure 2: Table 1 :

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Figure 3: Table 2 :

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Figure 4: Table 3 :

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c) Attitudinal barriers

Figure 5: Table 4 :

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Figure 6: Table 5 :

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Figure 7: Table 6 :



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