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

By Dr. Saundarya Rajesh & Anju Rakesh

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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I. Introduction

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

Advocates of flexi-working world over have devoted their time to understand the various hurdles that

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

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

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

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

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

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

II. Flexible Working Arrangements: Different Flavours

Flexible working arrangements refer to those working patterns different from the normal working patterns; they can involve changes to the hours an employee works, the times they are required to work or their places of work. With the kind of technological advancement that the world has witnessed, one can afford the luxury of working remotely from any part of the world during any time of the day. Some of the most popular flexible working arrangements amongst employees, world over are:

Part-time work: requires employees to work a lower number of hours than would be considered full time by their employer

Telecommuting: employees do not commute to a central place of work, they can work from home or from any remote location as long as they are connected to work virtually

Flexi-time arrangement: requires employees to be at work during a specified core period, but lets them otherwise arrange their hours to suit themselves

Compressed work hours: employees work the same number of hours, over fewer days

Staggered hours contract: employees can start and finish work at different times

Annual hours contract: employers and employees agree they will work a given number of hours during the year, but the pattern of work can vary from week to week

Job sharing: one job is shared between two people, who might work alternate days, half weeks, or alternate weeks, or one person working in the morning and one in the afternoon

Term-time work: is an arrangement whereby an employee is contracted to work a particular number of weeks per year on either a full or part-time basis. His/her non-working time is scheduled at regular, planned periods which are accounted for by a combination of annual leave and unpaid leave. Designated working weeks will normally coincide with school terms.

III. Research Methodology

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

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

department of their organizations. The distribution of the women workforce (who took the survey) across industries is as shown in Figure 1.
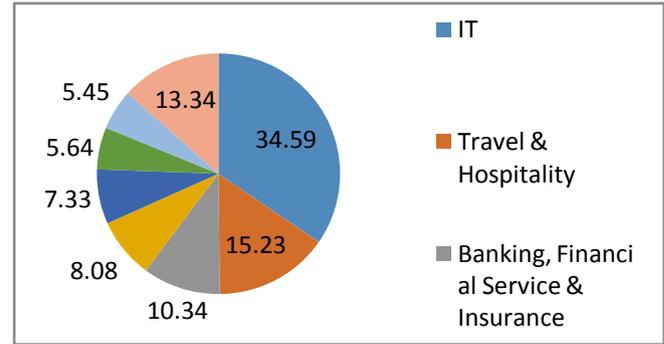

Figure 1 : Distribution of women professionals across industries who underwent this study

IV. Key Findings

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

a) Cultural barriers to flexible working

As can be seen from Table 1, the most common cultural barrier that came in the way of an IWP's path to work flexibility was the lack of successful role models who climbed up the corporate ladder while being a flexi-worker for a large part of their professional journeys. 32% of women professionals in the IT sector and 63% of those who were consultants felt that in the absence of women who made it work 'flexibly', they did not have anyone to look up to and were discouraged to even make attempts to negotiate flexible working with their respective employers. It is upto the few fortunate women leaders of today who were beneficiaries of flexibility to showcase and propagate their success stories so that the women professionals who are now at the threshold of their careers have paths worth emulating. The second biggest barrier under this category was the lack of a flexible culture in the women professionals' organizations. A large proportion of women who undertook this survey felt that when organizational policies were hostile to the concept of flexibility they found it difficult to negotiate and obtain

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flexibility from their employers. Agreement of 46% women in the banking sector and 27% in ITES to the threat posed by this barrier is evidence enough. If organizations in the Indian corporate sector were to pay attention to this fact and welcome the wave of work flexibility, they would be able to tap the potentials of the women on their rolls to the fullest possible extent. The third and the last very common cultural barrier to flexible working that IWPs employed in sectors a diverse as IT and manufacturing reported was the presentee-ism expectation of their supervisors and others. Almost 50% of women in the manufacturing industry and 36% of women in the telecom industry felt that their managers strongly believed that to operate efficiently, they need to be present physically at office during what is considered normal working hours. Many women surveyed were of the opinion that not only their line managers but also their circle of friends and family considered them to be less serious about their jobs while working flexibly, possibly because of their reluctance to accept a culture of work that defies the centuries' old norm of being present in office when employed formally. It was only in the consulting sector that women did not feel much threatened by such mindsets (only around 5% women counted this as a barrier) probably because of their nature of work that offered an amount of inherent flexibility. The results are thus indicative of the fact that a change at the very roots of our society's work culture is required in enabling IWPs plot impressive career graphs with the aid of flexibility

Table 1: Cultural barriers to flexible working as viewed by IWPs (industry wise)

Industry / Barrier	IT	ITES / BPO	Telecom	Travel & Hospitality	Retail	Manufacturing / Engineering	Banking, Financial Service & Insurance	FMCG / Consumer Goods	Consulting	Media & Advertising	Education	Others	Total
Presentee-ism mindset of supervisor and the society	25.97%	27.78%	36.36%	12.00%	50.00%	50.00%	11.54%	0.00%	5.26%	10.00%	20.00%	0.00%	19.01%
Lack of a flexible culture within the organization	16.88%	5.56%	27.27%	16.00%	16.67%	50.00%	46.15%	60.00%	26.32%	50.00%	24.00%	100.00%	23.55%
Lack of successful women role models who have worked flexibly	32.47%	22.22%	27.27%	24.00%	0.00%	0.00%	11.54%	0.00%	63.16%	30.00%	40.00%	0.00%	27.27%
No big problem faced	1.30%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.65%

Table 2 : Cultural barriers to flexible working as viewed by IWPs at different managerial levels

Barrier \\ Level	Junior Management (Sr. Exec to AM level)	Middle Management (Mgr to Senior Mgr, DGM, AGM)	Senior Management (GM, AVP, VP, Sr. VP)	CXO / Leadership position (COO, CEO, CFO, CTO, CMO et al)
Presentee-ism mindset of supervisor and the society	21.01%	20.00%	11.11%	14.29%
Lack of a flexible culture within the organization	18.49%	26.25%	30.56%	42.86%
Lack of successful women role models who have worked flexibly	16.81%	35.00%	41.67%	42.86%
No big problem faced	3.36%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

In table 2 are shown the attitudes of women professionals at different levels of management (from junior management to Leadership positions) to cultural barriers of flexible working. It might be interesting to note that 42% of women who have made it to the top and are currently corporate leaders feel it is the lack of a flexible culture that was a major stumbling block that they encountered. A good number of women in the junior and middle management levels felt their managers (both men and women) expected them to be present at office and work under their supervision. Seldom were these managers sympathetic to their need for flexibility to the extent that this barrier was career threatening. As women rose higher up in the ranks their quests for the right pattern of flexible work were often deterred by the lack of successful women leaders who had used flexibility at vital points in their career trajectories. They were unsure of their ability to make it big if they opted for work flexibility. 41% of women in senior positions and 42% of women in leadership roles shared this opinion. From the findings, it may be concluded that a paradigm shift in the work culture of organizations should be called for in order to create successful women professionals who are ambassadors of flexibility.

b) Infrastructural barriers

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

Almost 17% of employed women in the IT enabled services said their requests for flexible working often met with a lukewarm response from their HR departments as many HR managers felt granting such requests on a case basis is problematic and generates additional overheads for them. This could probably be because HR managers who are generally the advisors of policy makers in most organizations feel that it is difficult to evaluate the genuinity of requests for flexi work from women employees. Also, as streamlining and implementing such requests might call for changes in the clauses of certain administrative procedures of the organizations, managers are not fully convinced of the need for the same. They could also be held back by the fact that granting such requests might set unfair standards in the company, wherein male and female employees are treated differently. Our study recommends that the severity of this barrier can be reduced if HR professionals, led by the women amongst them discuss / debate and reach a consensus on organizational policies related to flexible working and hand a fair deal to valuable women employees who are much in need of it. It could be a matter of a few years that such requests are executed with commendable ease just as routine requests for maternity leaves.

Table 3 : Infrastructural barriers to flexible working as viewed by IWPs (industry wise)

Industry / Barrier	IT	ITES / BPO	Telecom	Travel & Hospitality	Retail	Manufacturing / Engineering	Banking, Financial Service & Insurance	FMCG / Consumer Goods	Consulting	Media & Advertising	Education	Others	Total
Lack of infrastructure in the organization to enable flexi-working	12.99%	5.56%	0.00%	0.00%	16.67%	0.00%	3.85%	0.00%	0.00%	10.00%	0.00%	0.00%	7.02%
Administering of FWA being seen as problematic by HR Admin	3.90%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	12.00%	0.00%	3.72%

It can be inferred from Table 4 that infrastructural barriers prove to be no serious threats to women in the higher echelons of management. It is women who are at the junior and middle management levels who stumble upon such obstacles. The few who have been able to work their way up the ladder are able to have their way with flexibility often because of their power and position in their organizations and because the organization values their contributions. However junior women (almost 12% of them) opined that infrastructural support from their companies that could enable them to work flexibly was scarce indeed. This prompted many of them to contemplate quitting work even when they did not want to, as their employers were insensitive to their need for work-family integration. 5% of IWPs who were junior managers or below and on whom this research was conducted were of the opinion that all their attempts to negotiate flexibility fell on deaf ears as HR personnel were not ready to take the extra effort required to accept these requests. The onus is now on the women leaders of today's corporate India to initiate a welcome change to this end that can help retain supremely talented women professionals on the career track even when their lives outside of work are extremely demanding of them.

Table 4 : Infrastructural barriers to flexible working as viewed by IWPs in different managerial levels

Level / Barrier	Junior Management (Sr. Exec to AM level)	Middle Management (Mgr to Senior Mgr, DGM, AGM)	Senior Management (GM, AVP, VP, Sr. VP)	CXO / Leadership position (COO, CEO, CFO, CTO, CMO et al)
Lack of infrastructure in the organization to enable flexi-working	11.76%	3.75%	0.00%	0.00%
Administering of FWA being seen as problematic by HR Admin	5.04%	3.75%	0.00%	0.00%

c) *Attitudinal barriers*

While infrastructural and cultural barriers had come in the way of the dream of a flexible career for many an IWP, another major class of deterrents were the attitudinal barriers. When employees who prefer the conventional style of work (full time) view flexible or part time work as underperformance, women employees struggling with the juggling pressure of managing work and home are discouraged from opting for flexibility. They harbor the fear of being alienated at the workplace and being considered inefficient. For many IWPs who find themselves in such a scenario, quitting work appears easier than pushing their requests for flexibility. Almost 7% of women employed in varied industrial divisions agree that they have faced this barrier while they evolved to being a flexi-worker. The resentful attitude of full-time co-workers could be attributed to their inability to make minor adjustments to accommodate their team-mate's flexible schedule. It could also be because they misconstrue the granting of requests for flexibility to certain employees as unequal treatment meted out by their managements. This research points out that if all employees in a particular organization decide to accept the importance of work flexibility and its ability to alter the career paths of Indian Women Professionals, it could bring a huge change in the productivity of the women workforce engaged in various trades across India. Another significant barrier of this type was a lack of support from the top management of a company for this all-important women's career enabler. The thought leaders and policy makers of many organizations in the country tend to ignore the urgency associated with formalizing flexible working while focusing on achieving competitive business targets. The fact that only a handful of women are in the top managements of firms across India also could be a reason for this lack of awareness and sensitivity. In the typical corporate career model that suits the career paths of Indian men perfectly, work flexibility as a policy fails to garner attention. 36% of women in the travel and hospitality sector felt that this barrier had derailed their journeys to flexibility.

Table 5 : Attitudinal barriers to flexible working as viewed by IWPs (industry wise)

Industry / Barrier	IT	ITES / BPO	Telecom	Travel & Hospitality	Retail	Manufacturing / Engineering	Banking, Financial Service & Insurance	FMCG / Consumer Goods	Consulting	Media & Advertising	Education	Others	Total
Resentful attitude of full-time working colleagues	6.49%	5.56%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	3.85%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	7.02%
Lack of support for the concept from top management	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	36.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	5.26%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	3.72%

As can be understood from table 6, the cultural barriers to flexible working cease to exist when women rise up in corporate ranks. It is those at the initial stages of their careers who are more likely to encounter insensitive reactions from their colleagues to their need to work flexibly. Around 10% of IWPs at the junior and middle management levels voiced their concern over the resentful attitudes of their co-workers when they work flexibly. It could be that at junior levels, professionals are least likely to enjoy total autonomy over their schedules, targets or deadlines and it is required of them to contribute effectively to their respective teams by being physically present. Their voices go mostly unheard and their subordinates find it easier to complete work without having to make adjustments to fit in the flexible routines of their female co-workers. Another 8% of women of the entry level workforce felt that their managements were not positively oriented towards work flexibility. The lukewarm responses that their requests to be granted flexibility received owing to the management's lack of interest in initiating policies for the same came in their way to career sustainability through flexibility. When women are at senior levels and are directly connected to policy makers of their organizations, the urgency associated with their requests is more pronounced and these requests are more often accepted. If corporate leaders especially women who have successfully negoti-ated and used work flexibility at earlier stages of their careers, pioneer its cause, it can provide the much needed impetus to the younger women attempting to navigate their careers flexibly.

Table 6 : Attitudinal barriers to flexible working as viewed by IWPs across different managerial levels

Level Barrier	Junior Management (Sr. Exec to AM level)	Middle Management (Mgr to Senior Mgr, DGM, AGM)	Senior Management (GM, AVP, VP, Sr. VP)	CXO / Leadership position (COO, CEO, CFO, CTO, CMO et al)
Resentful attitude of full-time working colleagues	5.88%	3.75%	0.00%	0.00%
Lack of support for the concept from top management	8.40%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

V. Conclusions

The study which was conducted amongst women performing vastly different job functions and at markedly different career junctures helped us arrive at some insightful conclusions on the stumbling blocks that characterize an average Indian Woman Professional's path to flexible working. 43% of the research subjects opined that it was the lack of successful women role models who worked their way up flexibly that stopped them from embracing this culture of work. The second most imposing barrier was the lack of infrastructural support at an IWP's organization that would have enabled work flexibility. This research also found that when managers of women employees viewed working flexibly as an act of underperformance, it further diminished the prospects of career growth for these women. Almost 30% of women felt that in the absence of formal flexible working policies at their respective organizations, it was impossible to ingrain this way of work in the organizational culture. The absence of support and enablement from the top management, resentful attitudes of peers and lack of sensitivity to a woman's need to work flexibly were the other significant deterrents. While infrastructural improvement and employee sensitization to create a culture of flexible work, calls for investment of time, money and effort at the organizations' end, the onus is on the corporate society and women themselves to welcome work flexibility shunning all apprehensions regarding its effectiveness. It is also desired that the families of the women professionals wholeheartedly encourage this new architecture of work and give due respect to the professional contributions made by these women. Together, India Inc. could march forward to an empowered, gender balanced workforce tomorrow

VI. Future Work

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

VII. Notes

Presentee-ism culture - The work culture in which an employee is required to be physically present in his/her office during formal working hours.

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