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Q7(a)

What is 'informal labour' ? Discuss the need for and challenges in regulating informal labour in the post-industrial society

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Works and Economic Life

Works and Economic Life: Social organization of work in different types of society; Formal and informal organization of work; Labour and society.

Core demand of the question

- What is 'informal labour'? Discuss the need for and challenges in regulating informal labour in the post-industrial society
- Keep the discussion within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

- **Informal labour:** work without secure contract and social security.

Hart, ILO, and Breman named the field; PLFS shows Indian scale.

Post-industrial services and gigs informalised rather than ended it.

Regulation is needed for safety and gender-visible care work.

- **Challenges:** many principals, livelihood fear, weak inspection.

Portable benefits beat paper formalisation.

Introduction

Informal labour is work without secure contract, social security, or full legal coverage. Jan Breman and others showed it as the majority condition in India, not a leftover of farms. Post-industrial society did not end it. Platforms and outsourcing grew it.

Body

What it is

- **Keith Hart** named the informal sector in Ghana. ILO later stressed decent-work deficits: no leave, no pension, no voice.
- It includes street vending, home-based piece-work, casual construction, and now gig delivery.
- **Karl Marx's** reserve army and self-employment sit inside it. Census and PLFS class-of-worker tables show the scale.

Need for regulation

- Without rules, wages and safety are private bargains between unequal parties. **Max Weber's** formal law does not reach the shed.
- Gendered home-based work, as Ann Oakley and Indian feminist labour studies show, is invisible unless named.
- Cities need vendors and riders; public health and traffic need standards.
- Tax and welfare states otherwise rest on a thin formal sliver.

Post-industrial twist

- **Daniel Bell's service society promised knowledge work. Much service work is informalised:** care, logistics, click-work.
- Global value chains push risk down to informal units, which A. G. Frank's linkage thesis still illuminates.

Challenges of regulation

- No single employer. Who is the principal for a gig app or a chain of contractors?
- Workers fear loss of flexibility and police harassment if licensing is only a squeeze.
- State capacity and corruption. Inspectors can become another rent.
- **SEWA**-type organising shows voice is possible; it is hard to scale to national codes.
- Over-formalisation without social security can destroy livelihoods, as some street-vendor drives showed.

A workable line

- Register the work, not only the firm. Portable benefits beat a fake factory Act on a cart.

Flow diagram

Informal labour -> No contract security

Post-industrial platforms -> Informal labour

Safety welfare voice -> Regulation

No employer capacity fear -> Regulation

Conclusion

Informal labour is insecure, uncovered work that post-industrial platforms have expanded. Regulation is needed for safety, gender justice, and a welfare base. The challenge is to find an employer, avoid mere policing, and build portable security. **Breman**, ILO, and **SEWA** mark the field.

Facts & figures

Hart

Named the informal sector from urban Ghana, against a dualist leftover story.

Breman

Indian informal labour as circular migration and footloose work, not a waiting room.

ILO decent work

Agenda of rights, security, and voice that informal jobs typically lack.

SEWA

Organising of women informal workers as a regulatory and voice model.

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