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Q2(c)

What is 'reserve army of labour' ? Present the position of feminist scholars on this

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- What is 'reserve army of labour'? Present the position of feminist scholars on this
- Keep the answer within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

- **Reserve army:** surplus labour that capital expands and contracts to discipline wages.

Floating, latent, and stagnant forms in **Marx**.

- **Feminists:** women as flexible wage reserve and unpaid reproductive labour.

Oakley and social-reproduction theory make housework part of the army's base.

NSSO "low participation" often hides that tank.

Introduction

Marx's reserve army of labour is the surplus population that capital can draw in or expel as accumulation needs. It disciplines the employed by the threat of replacement. Feminist scholars asked who that army is, and how unpaid care fills and hides it.

Body

The Marxist concept

- In Capital, the industrial reserve army includes the floating, latent, and stagnant surplus.
- Unemployment is not an accident. It is a lever of wages and a condition of expansion.
- Informal and migrant workers in India often live this function even without a factory roll.

Feminist positions

- **Heidi Hartmann** and later Marxist feminists argued that women are a flexible reserve: drawn into wartime and export factories, sent back to the household.
- Silvia Federici and social-reproduction writers treated unpaid domestic labour as the hidden condition of the wage, not a private leftover.
- Ann **Oakley** made housework visible as work. The "non-working" woman is already labour.
- Indian scholarship on home-based garment work and SHGs shows women as both cheap wage labour and a care reserve. NSSO low female labour-force rates often misread this.

Tension

- A reserve-army story that only counts the male unemployed misses the household as a labour tank.

Flow diagram

Capital accumulation -> Reserve army

Reserve army -> Wage discipline

Unpaid care -> Reserve army

Feminist reading -> Unpaid care

Conclusion

The reserve army is capital's surplus labour that regulates the wage. Feminists relocate much of that surplus in gendered households and informal shops. Oakley, Hartmann, and social-reproduction theory make the concept usable for India only if unpaid care is counted.

Facts & figures

Marx

Industrial reserve army as a necessary product of capitalist accumulation.

Hartmann

Patriarchy and capital together use women as a flexible labour reserve.

Oakley

Housework is work; the housewife is not outside the labour question.

NSSO / PLFS

Female labour-force figures that undercount home-based and unpaid work.