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Q5(c)

Do you think that the formal workspaces are free of gender bias? Argue your case.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · 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

- **Define formal workplaces:** organisations with rules, contracts, offices
- **Argue they are not free of gender bias:** structure, culture, care penalty, harassment, occupational segregation
- Use Acker, Kanter, Hochschild, Indian POSH and labour facts
- Take a clear case, not a maybe

Revision summary

Formal organisations claim impersonal merit; gendered sociology shows otherwise.

Acker's gendered job, Kanter's tokens and Hochschild's **second shift** are core arguments.

Pay gaps, glass ceilings and care penalties persist inside contracts and appraisals.

POSH law in India is evidence that formal offices were not automatically safe.

Formalisation can reduce some arbitrary power but also bureaucratises male defaults.

The argued case is that formal workspaces are not free of gender bias.

Introduction

- **Formal workplaces present themselves as rule-bound, meritocratic and impersonal:** the office, the factory with contracts, the civil service, the corporate firm. **Max Weber's** bureaucracy promised office without regard to person. The sociological record is that formality has not abolished gender bias. It has often reorganised it as recruitment filters, career clocks, occupational ghettos, pay gaps and cultures of the ideal male worker.

Body

Bias inside the rules

- **Joan Acker argued that organisations are gendered:** the abstract "job" assumes a body without care burdens and a life without pregnancy. Rosabeth Moss Kanter showed how tokens and skewed sex ratios produce stereotyped roles. Arlie Hochschild described the **second shift** at home and emotional labour at work, both of which fall more on women. The glass ceiling, glass cliff and sticky floor name patterns that formal appraisal systems still generate. Occupational segregation concentrates women in nursing, teaching, clerical and care-adjacent jobs even inside the formal sector, while boards and shop-floor technical grades remain male-heavy.

Harassment, pregnancy discrimination and the motherhood penalty show that a standing order is not a sex-neutral order. India's Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013

(POSH) exists because formal offices were not safe by virtue of being formal. Female labour-force participation has been stubbornly low, and even salaried women cluster in certain services. Dalit and Muslim women face a compounded filter at the gate. LGBTQ workers may be formally employed and informally closeted.

A contrary claim that markets and HR manuals dissolve patriarchy ignores unpaid care as a tax on women's time, after the Time Use Survey, and ignores client-facing emotional rules that still code authority as male. Formalisation can help: written pay, unions, maternity benefits, internal complaints committees. It does not, by itself, equalise. The case to argue is therefore that formal workspaces are not free of gender bias; they are arenas where bias is bureaucratised and sometimes contested.

Flow diagram

Formal workplace -> Ideal male worker
Formal workplace -> Occupational segregation
Formal workplace -> Care and motherhood penalty
Formal workplace -> Harassment despite rules
POSH unions benefits -> Formal workplace

Conclusion

Formal workplaces are organised by gender even when their handbooks deny it. Bias sits in the ideal worker, in care penalties, in segregation and in harassment. Law and unions can check it; formality alone does not erase it.

Facts & figures

Gendered organisations

Acker's thesis that jobs, hierarchies and the abstract worker are built on men's typical life-course.

POSH Act 2013

Indian statute requiring internal complaints mechanisms, recognising sexual harassment in workplaces including some informal coverage debates.

Second shift

Hochschild's term for unpaid domestic labour after paid work, which structures who can perform the 'committed' official.