Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.



SOCIOLOGY SCHOOL 2026 · PAPER I · QUESTION 1(B) · STUDENT EDITION

Women's Position in the Informal Economy

THE QUESTION, AS SET IN UPSC CSE MAINS 2026

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

Directive: Critically examine | 10 marks | 150 words

Works and Economic Life: Gender and informal employment

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Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

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Start here: the basics in plain words

New to Sociology? Read this page first. It explains the key ideas in the question in everyday language, so the rest of the document makes sense.

The question in simple words

Many women in India undertake paid or unpaid work with limited employment security or protection. Much of this activity forms part of the informal economy, although informal work takes many different forms. The question asks you to **judge, with reasons and evidence, what position women hold in it**: what they gain, what they lose and why.

Word	What it means, in plain words	An everyday picture
Informal economy	Work and economic activities that lack formal registration or effective employment protections. Workers may have no written contract, paid leave or social security, even where labour laws apply.	A domestic worker paid in cash by several households, or a vendor selling vegetables from a cart.
Formal economy	Registered economic activities and formal employment arrangements, generally involving clearer legal obligations and employment protections. Informal workers may also work within registered businesses.	A clerk in a government office or a salaried employee in a registered company.
Position	Where women stand in this work: the kinds of jobs open to them, their pay, security, control over income and voice.	Who decides the wage, who keeps the money, and who can complain if something goes wrong.
Home-based and unpaid work	Home-based work may be paid, often by the piece. Unpaid work includes contributions to a family farm or business, while unpaid household and care work also shapes women's employment opportunities.	A woman embroidering garments at home for a contractor, paid per piece.
Critically examine	Look at the issue from several sides, weigh the evidence and give a balanced judgement, not just a description.	Like reviewing a policy: what works, what does not, and why.

One picture to remember. Picture different forms of work with unequal pay, protection and recognition. Women's experiences vary across occupations and social groups. The question asks what shapes these inequalities and how women respond to them.

What the examiner wants, in one line. Show the different ways women take part in informal work, explain the forces (gender norms, care work, caste and class, the state) that shape their position, and judge both the hardships and the forms of agency and organising.

You now have the foundations. Section 1 examines the question carefully, while the later sections introduce the thinkers, Indian evidence and model answer needed to build a well-supported sociological argument.

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1 PYQ Deep Decode

Read the question through four connected dimensions: women's actual position in informal employment, the social forces producing that position, the differences among women, and the extent to which work translates into economic independence.

1.1 The demand

The question asks for a **critical examination of women's position in the informal economy**. "Position" is wider than employment participation: it covers the **nature of work, earnings, working conditions, security and control over resources**. "Critically examine" requires explaining **why** women occupy particular positions, identifying the social and economic forces behind them, and assessing whether participation improves their circumstances. The answer must therefore move from **employment conditions** to **structural explanation** and finally to a **qualified judgement about empowerment**. It must not simply catalogue disadvantages.

Words in the question	What they ask you to do	What goes wrong if you miss them
Critically examine	Describe the position, explain its causes, test different interpretations and reach a reasoned assessment.	Listing difficulties without analysing how they arise or whether circumstances vary.
Position	Assess employment status, remuneration, conditions, security, social recognition, bargaining power and control over resources.	Reducing women's position to their labour force participation rate.
Women	Keep gender central while recognising differences associated with caste, class, location, migration and employment arrangements.	Writing about informal workers generally, or presenting all women as one category.
Informal economy	Use the broad sociological field of informal enterprises, informal jobs, self-employment, casual labour and home-based production. Distinguish the enterprise from the employment relationship.	Equating informality only with street vending, or assuming every worker in a formal enterprise has a formal job.
Examine the position	Connect observable conditions with the relations of production, household power and social stratification that shape them.	Substituting a generic policy essay about skill development and welfare schemes.

THE DEMAND IN ONE LINE

Examine women's employment, earnings, security and control over resources in the informal economy; explain the gendered and economic structures producing these conditions; and assess their unequal consequences for economic empowerment.

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1.2 The hidden demand

Does participation in informal work necessarily produce economic independence and greater bargaining power? The question tests whether the student can distinguish **doing economically productive work** from **controlling its returns**. A woman may earn through home-based production while someone else negotiates her rate or controls the payment. Conversely, collective organisation, independent access to markets and control over assets can improve her bargaining position even without a conventional salaried job.
The second test is **variation among women**. Caste and class shape access to occupations, assets, networks and markets; migration can affect access to local support and social protection; and self-employed entrepreneurs, subcontracted workers, casual labourers and unpaid family workers occupy different positions. A strong critical examination therefore rejects both extremes: **informal employment is not automatically empowerment, but neither does it eliminate women's agency**.

Three sociological distinctions make the hidden demand visible. They help convert a description of employment into an assessment of power.

Distinction	What to investigate	Why it changes the judgement
Employment versus remuneration	Is the woman an own-account worker, paid employee, piece-rate producer or unpaid helper in a household enterprise?	Being counted as employed does not establish that she receives an independent income.
Income versus control	Who sets the rate, receives payment, controls the account and decides how earnings are used?	Bina Agarwal's bargaining perspective makes control and fallback resources central to economic independence.
Individual versus structural opportunity	What do caste, class, migration, care obligations and collective organisation permit or restrict?	Different women can experience similar jobs very differently, without inequality being reducible to individual choice.

WEAK

Women in the informal sector suffer from low wages, long hours, exploitation, illiteracy and lack of social security. The government should provide loans, training and employment opportunities.

STRONG

Maria Mies's study of Narsapur lace workers shows how market production could be organised through women's status as housewives, helping sustain low remuneration. Bina Agarwal's bargaining approach then asks whether such earnings improve control over resources. Thus employment and empowerment must be assessed separately, with attention to caste, class and the organisation of work.

1.3 The structure

The question has **one explicit task**, critically examine women's position. Its answer requires three successive analytical steps. First, establish the characteristics of that position; second, explain the forces producing it; third, assess variation and the limits of empowerment. The final step answers the hidden demand and receives the smallest share. The proportions below refer to the body, excluding the introduction and conclusion, and are a teaching guide rather than a UPSC rule.

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Introduction	1. Women's position about two-fifths	2. Forces shaping it about two-fifths	3. Unequal empowerment about one-fifth	Conclusion

Part 1 Women's position within informal employment — about two-fifths

Employment forms	Self-employment, including own-account and contributing family work; casual wage labour; and home-based production, which may occur under different employment arrangements.
Earnings	Gender disparities, irregular payments, piece-rate remuneration and limited negotiating power.
Working conditions	Insecure work, fragmented employment relationships and uneven access to social protection.
Stratified occupations	Occupational segregation and restricted entry into better-remunerated activities.
Recognition	Productive work performed within households may be treated socially as an extension of domestic duties.

Part 2 Social and economic forces shaping this position — about two-fifths

Gendered division of labour	Responsibility for unpaid domestic and care work constrains paid-work choices.
Patriarchal relations	Household power can regulate mobility, occupation, earnings and asset control.
Production relations	Contractors, intermediaries and subcontracting chains can disperse workers and weaken bargaining power.
Maria Mies, 1982	Narsapur's home-based lace production shows how women's work for distant markets can remain underpaid and socially obscured.
Intersecting inequalities	Caste and class affect access to resources, occupations and bargaining opportunities.

Part 3 Unequal experiences and the limits of economic empowerment — about one-fifth

Different starting positions	Women differ by caste, class, location, migration status, assets and employment type.
Conditions for agency	Independent earnings, control over assets, collective organisation and a stronger fallback position may expand choice.
Critical judgement	Participation can create opportunities, but its empowering effects depend on the terms of work and control over resources.

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The causal logic **Keep the three parts connected** not three separate essays

What is observed?	Irregular earnings, unpaid family work and insecurity.
Why does it occur?	Gendered care obligations, unequal power and flexible production arrangements.
What follows?	Employment may improve livelihood opportunities without necessarily transferring economic decision-making power.

1.4 How to present it

This is a **short sociological argument**, not a long welfare inventory. The most effective form is **three numbered, headed parts**, supported by two well-used thinkers and one Indian empirical anchor. Within 150 words, the concepts must explain the evidence rather than appear as a separate list of names. A compact **work to earnings to control** flow can express the hidden demand if it does not displace substantive analysis.

Element	Where it belongs	What to use	Why it earns its place
Thinker explaining labour	Part 2	**Maria Mies**: The Lace Makers of Narsapur (1982).	Connects home-based, low-paid production with capitalist markets and the ideology of housewifisation.
Thinker evaluating empowerment	Part 3	**Bina Agarwal**: bargaining, assets and control; alternatively, **Naila Kabeer**: resources, agency and achievements.	Distinguishes income generation from effective economic independence.
Explicit perspective	Part 2	**Marxian feminist** or feminist political economy.	Explains the connection between unpaid reproductive work, flexible labour and accumulation.
Core concepts	Parts 1 and 2	Informal employment, contributing family labour, sexual division of labour, subcontracting.	Replaces vague language with precise sociological categories.
Indian statistical evidence	Part 1	PLFS 2025: **28.3%** of employed women in usual status were helpers in household enterprises, nationally.	Shows why recorded employment cannot be equated with independent wage earnings.

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Element	Where it belongs	What to use	Why it earns its place
Time-use evidence	Part 2	Time Use Survey 2024: female participants aged 15 to 59 spent **305 minutes** daily on unpaid domestic services, versus **86** for male participants.	Gives an empirical basis for the constraint imposed by domestic work.
Mini-flow	Part 3	Work → earnings → control over earnings.	The three stages can diverge; participation alone is insufficient.
Balanced close	Conclusion	Economic agency is conditional upon remuneration, resources, protection and bargaining power.	Completes the critical examination without portraying informal women workers as passive.

Evidence choice: in a 150-word response, use one decisive statistic and one ethnographic illustration. The PLFS and Time Use Survey measure different things, so their figures should never be combined as though they describe the same population or employment status.

1.5 The introduction and the conclusion

The introduction serves the whole question. Establish that informal employment is a significant site of women's productive labour, but that participation, conditions of work and control over its returns must be considered together. Do not open with a dictionary definition, an unsupported percentage or an assertion that all informal work is exploitation.

The conclusion delivers the critical judgement. Acknowledge women's economic contribution and capacity for collective agency while recognising that insecure employment, unequal care responsibilities and limited resource control constrain empowerment. The decisive issue is not participation alone but the terms on which women work and exercise choice.

2 PYQ Intelligence 2013 to 2026

Why this question belonged to a live debate in 2026, how UPSC has repeatedly approached informality, gender and labour, and which connected parts of the Sociology syllabus should be prepared together.

2.1 Why the subject was topical in 2026

By the 2026 examination, new official surveys had sharpened a central sociological puzzle: **higher female work participation does not by itself establish a corresponding improvement in job quality, remuneration or bargaining power**. The Periodic Labour Force Survey distinguished employment categories, the Time Use Survey documented unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, and enterprise surveys recorded women's growing presence as proprietors. Meanwhile, labour-law changes raised questions about the extent and enforceability of social protection. These developments are **context, not proof of why UPSC selected the question**. Every development below predates August 2026.

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When	What happened	Why it matters sociologically
23 September 2024	MoSPI released the **PLFS Annual Report 2023-24**. Female labour force participation among those aged 15 and above, in usual status, rose to **41.7%**, from 37.0% in 2022-23. Female worker-population ratio reached 40.3%. These are estimates for July to June survey years.	Greater measured participation creates a question about the **quality and terms** of employment. LFPR measures labour-force participation, not control over income.
29 January 2025	MoSPI's detailed **ASUSE 2023-24** release reported that women headed **26.2%** of proprietary establishments in the surveyed unincorporated non-agricultural sector, against 22.9% in the previous survey.	Women's enterprise participation is visible, but ownership statistics do not independently establish profitability, autonomy or access to social protection.
25 February and 28 March 2025	MoSPI released the findings and detailed report of the **Time Use Survey 2024**. Among participants aged 15 to 59, women spent on average **305 minutes daily** on unpaid domestic services, compared with 86 minutes for men. Women participating in unpaid caregiving spent 140 minutes, compared with 74 for men.	Demonstrates the scale of **gendered social reproduction** and the time constraints within which women's employment choices are made. The figures are per participant, not averages for all women and men.
21 November 2025	The four national **Labour Codes** came into effect, including the Code on Social Security, 2020. Their provisions envisage broader coverage of unorganised, gig and platform workers, with further schemes and implementation mechanisms relevant to actual access.	Raises the difference between **legal recognition** and **effective protection**. A statutory framework must not be mistaken for proof that every informal worker already receives benefits.
5 February 2026	In a Rajya Sabha reply, the Ministry of Labour and Employment explained provisions for minimum wages, social security, migrant workers and women's employment under the implemented Labour Codes.	Shows the policy recognition of informality, while leaving an empirical question: which workers can claim and effectively obtain these protections?
24 March 2026	**ASUSE 2025** results reported approximately **27%** female-headed proprietary establishments in the surveyed unincorporated non-agricultural sector, compared with 26.2% in ASUSE 2023-24. The survey also reported 12.81 crore workers in the sector.	A reminder that the informal or unincorporated economy includes **women proprietors as well as hired and own-account workers**. Employment categories must not be homogenised.
25 March 2026	MoSPI informed Parliament that in the 2024 Time Use Survey, **41%** of women aged 15 to 59 participated in unpaid caregiving for household members, compared with **21.4%** of men.	The care burden is a measurable social constraint, not an individual preference that can simply be assumed.
27 March 2026	MoSPI released the **PLFS Annual Report 2025**, covering January to December 2025. Female LFPR for persons aged 15 and above in usual status was **40.0%**, and female WPR was **38.8%**. The report also found that 44.4% of women outside the labour force cited childcare or homemaking commitments as their main reason.	The participation figure and the household-responsibility figure together identify an important **work-care relationship**, without establishing a simple causal effect for every woman.

Reading the evidence correctly: PLFS 2023-24 covers July 2023 to June 2024, while PLFS 2025 uses January to December 2025. The redesigned PLFS methodology also began in January 2025. Use the appropriately labelled figures and avoid treating every difference across survey series as a strictly comparable trend. ASUSE excludes important parts of agriculture and the corporate sector; it is not a count of every informal worker in India.

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2.2 The skill UPSC keeps testing

Across Sociology Papers I and II, UPSC has repeatedly joined four subjects: **informalisation of work, patriarchal divisions of labour, women's economic position and the stratification of labour markets**. The progression is analytical. Earlier questions asked about patriarchy and working women's difficulties; later questions examined globalisation, feminist interpretations of labour, equality in the informal sector and the gendered household division of labour. The 2026 question brings them together by asking for a **critical assessment of women's position**. The eight questions below are reproduced from UPSC Sociology Papers I and II, with their original year, paper and question number.

Year and paper	The question as UPSC set it	What it asked of you	What changed in 2026
2013 Sociology Paper I Q4(b), 20 marks	Is patriarchy a universal phenomenon? Critically examine how does patriarchy affect sexual division of labour in societies.	Explain patriarchy and its relationship with the division of labour.	Apply that relationship to women's actual employment arrangements and earnings.
2013 Sociology Paper II Q7(b), 20 marks	Discuss the problems of working women in India.	Identify problems affecting working women in the Indian context.	Move from identifying problems to explaining their structural causes and assessing differentiated outcomes.
2016 Sociology Paper I Q6(a), 20 marks	"Globalization has pushed the labour into informal organization of work." Substantiate your answer with suitable examples.	Relate globalisation to informal labour organisation.	Examine how those production arrangements shape women's position within informal work.
2019 Sociology Paper I Q2(c), 10 marks	What is 'reserve army of labour'? Present the position of feminist scholars on this.	Explain a Marxian category and feminist criticism of it.	Show the articulation of capitalist labour demand with gendered unpaid work and employment insecurity.
2021 Sociology Paper I Q5(a), 10 marks	Explain the emerging challenges in establishing gender equality in the informal sector.	Analyse obstacles to equality within informal employment.	Assess women's broader position, including employment status, economic control and possibilities for agency.
2024 Sociology Paper II Q5(b), 10 marks	Is there a connection between labour migration and informal sector? Justify your answer with reference to Indian context.	Connect mobility, migration and informal employment.	Treat migration status as one factor differentiating women's vulnerabilities and bargaining opportunities.
2025 Sociology Paper I Q4(c), 10 marks	Critically analyze the sociological significance of informal sector in the economy of developing societies.	Assess informality as a structural feature of developing economies.	Shift the unit of analysis to women within those economies, examining unequal employment relations.
2025 Sociology Paper I Q6(b), 20 marks	What do you understand by gender-based domestic division of labour? Is it undergoing a change in the wake of increasing participation of women in formal employment? Clarify your answer with illustrations.	Test whether paid employment changes the domestic division of labour.	Apply the same work-care question to women in informal employment, where home and workplace may overlap.

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The recurring thread: gender inequality cannot be explained by labour-market categories alone; the household, production system and wider social hierarchy must be examined together. The questions span both papers because the theoretical problem in Paper I is also an Indian social-structure problem in Paper II.

CARRY THIS METHOD TO ANY GENDER AND LABOUR QUESTION

1. **Specify the employment relationship:** who works, for whom, under which form of employment, and with what remuneration?
2. **Identify the social mechanism:** gendered care responsibilities, household power, caste and class constraints, or subcontracting.
3. **Use a thinker causally:** Mies explains how production can be hidden within housewifisation; Agarwal explains why income does not necessarily create control.
4. **Test the explanation with evidence:** use an accurately labelled PLFS or Time Use Survey figure and an Indian field study.
5. **Evaluate variation:** distinguish occupational arrangements and the resources available to differently positioned women.
6. **Conclude with a conditional judgement:** employment may expand choice, but whether it does depends on remuneration, security, resource control and collective voice.

2.3 What to prepare next

LINKED SOCIOLOGY PAPER I SYLLABUS TOPICS

4. Sociological Thinkers	Marx: modes of production and class; Durkheim: division of labour; Weber: power, authority and stratification.
5. Stratification and Mobility	Class, status, gender, inequality, exclusion and access to opportunities.
6. Works and Economic Life	Formal and informal organisation of work; labour and society; capitalist organisation of production.
9. Systems of Kinship	Family, household, patriarchy and sexual division of labour.
10. Social Change in Modern Society	Development, dependency, technological change and their consequences for labour.

LINKED SOCIOLOGY PAPER II SYLLABUS TOPICS

B(iv). Social Classes in India	Agrarian and industrial class structures and their differentiated employment opportunities.
B(v). Systems of Kinship in India	Patriarchy, entitlements and sexual division of labour.
C(ii). Rural and Agrarian Transformation	Changing modes of production; problems of rural labour, bondage and migration.
C(iii). Industrialization and Urbanisation	Working-class structure, informal sector and urban deprivation.
C(v). Social Movements in Modern India	Women's movements, worker organisation and collective claims.
C(vii). Challenges of Social Transformation	Poverty, deprivation, inequalities and related social vulnerabilities.

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3 Additional information

The sociological foundations, comparative perspectives, precise concepts, Indian ethnographies and verified evidence required to understand this question in depth. Tier 1 contains the essential analytical material; Tier 2 extends the discussion to theoretical disagreements and contemporary transformations.

TIER 1 · ESSENTIAL: EXACTLY WHAT THE DEMAND NEEDS

The sociological lens: thinkers who explain women's position

A strong Sociology answer does not attach thinkers to otherwise descriptive points. It uses a concept to establish **how a relationship produces an outcome**. Here the essential sequence runs from the organisation of labour, through gendered social reproduction and unequal power, to the conditions under which economic participation becomes agency.

Thinker	Work and year	Core idea in the thinker's terms	Use in this answer
Karl Marx	*Capital*, Volume I, **1867**.	Capital accumulation depends on the purchase and exploitation of labour power. The **relative surplus population** or industrial reserve army is generated through capitalist accumulation and places pressure on workers.	Explains why a supply of insecure workers and unequal bargaining relations can be integral to capitalist production. Feminist theory is needed to explain the specifically gendered organisation of this labour.
Emile Durkheim	*The Division of Labour in Society*, **1893**.	A differentiated division of labour can generate organic solidarity, but a **forced division of labour** occurs where external inequalities distort the allocation of social roles and the fairness of exchange.	Use cautiously: women's concentration in lower-paid occupations is not evidence of freely chosen specialisation. Durkheim offers a critical lens on unequal conditions, though he did not theorise contemporary Indian informality.
Max Weber	*Economy and Society*, published posthumously in **1922**.	**Class situation** concerns market opportunities and life chances; **status groups** organise social honour and closure. Economic class and status do not always coincide.	Explains why similar labour-market positions can produce different opportunities across caste, social status and access to resources. Informality alone does not define one uniform class experience.
Keith Hart	"Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana", **1973**.	His analysis of urban Ghana challenged the simple opposition between modern employment and passive unemployment by identifying diverse **informal income opportunities**.	Begin by recognising informal work as economically productive and heterogeneous, rather than treating everyone outside salaried employment as unemployed or economically inactive.

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Thinker	Work and year	Core idea in the thinker's terms	Use in this answer
Maria Mies	*The Lace Makers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market*, **1982**.	The treatment of producing women as **housewives rather than workers** helps render their labour socially invisible and enables low remuneration within production for capitalist markets. Her analysis is associated with **housewifisation**.	**The central explanatory thinker.** Narsapur's home-based lace producers demonstrate the link between patriarchal ideology, subcontracted production, low earnings and distant markets.
Caroline Moser	"Gender Planning in the Third World: Meeting Practical and Strategic Gender Needs", **1989**.	Women undertake a **triple role**: productive, reproductive and community-management work. She distinguishes practical needs from strategic gender interests involving changes in subordinate relations.	Explains why adding paid work without redistributing domestic responsibilities may increase women's total burden. Credit or income alone need not transform unequal gender relations.
Kimberlé Crenshaw	"Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex", **1989**.	**Intersectionality** challenges single-axis analyses which miss how differently structured relations of subordination interact. Her original intervention concerned race and sex in United States antidiscrimination analysis.	Apply the analytical approach to India, with proper contextual adaptation: gender must be examined alongside caste, class and migration rather than analysed as a uniform experience.
Uma Chakravarti	"Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State", **1993**.	**Brahmanical patriarchy** connects the regulation of women's sexuality and marriage with caste reproduction, patrilineal succession and gendered power in the historical formations she analyses.	Provides an Indian feminist framework for examining the structural intersection of caste and gender. Extend it to labour-market questions carefully, without claiming that her historical study directly measured today's informal employment.
Bina Agarwal	*A Field of One's Own*, **1994**; "'Bargaining' and Gender Relations: Within and Beyond the Household", **1997**.	**Command over property**, a person's fallback position, social norms and bargaining across household, market, community and state shape the exercise of economic power.	**The central evaluative thinker.** Ask whether informal earnings are individually controlled, whether assets are owned, and whether work improves bargaining rather than merely increasing household production.

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Thinker	Work and year	Core idea in the thinker's terms	Use in this answer
Naila Kabeer	"Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment", **1999**.	Empowerment means gaining the ability to make **strategic life choices** previously denied, analysed through interrelated **resources, agency and achievements**.	Provides the test for the conclusion: employment and income are potential resources; empowerment also depends on effective decision-making and achieved outcomes.
Martha Alter Chen	*The Informal Economy: Definitions, Theories and Policies*, **2012**.	Informality is **heterogeneous** and interconnected with formal economic structures. Policy must address employment, legal and social protection, productivity and incomes rather than assume one uniform informal sector.	Distinguish own-account enterprises, contributing family work, subcontracted home work and employees without effective employment protection.
Rina Agarwala	*Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India*, **2013**.	Informal workers can organise through **citizenship-based claims**, state welfare demands and neighbourhood-level mobilisation instead of relying exclusively on conventional shop-floor bargaining.	Corrects the portrayal of informal women workers as necessarily unorganised or powerless. Collective action can expand recognition and claims on social protection.

Theory combination for a 10-mark answer. Mies + Agarwal provides a particularly effective pair. Mies explains how production relations and patriarchal constructions of women's work produce disadvantage; Agarwal evaluates whether economic participation increases control and bargaining power. Add one accurately labelled Indian statistic.

Where classical theory belongs. Marx explains accumulation and labour-market power; Weber explains differentiated market opportunities and status; Durkheim raises the issue of forced occupational allocation. These are conceptual foundations, not claims that the classical thinkers personally studied women's informal employment in contemporary India.

Perspectives: how different sociological traditions read the same position

Perspective	Explanation of women's position	What it makes visible
Functionalist and Durkheimian	The division of labour organises differentiated activities, but occupational allocation under unequal external conditions can become a **forced division** rather than a mutually beneficial specialisation.	Why a socially accepted gender division of labour need not be fair or conducive to solidarity. Avoid treating customary roles as naturally appropriate.
Marxian and conflict	Informalisation may enable capital to obtain flexible labour, disperse production and shift risks towards households and workers.	The connection between subcontracting, weak bargaining power and value extraction; also the limits of interpreting all informal workers as one proletarian class.
Weberian stratification	Market position depends on property, skills and opportunities, while social closure and status distinctions can restrict access to particular occupations.	Differences among women with unequal assets, caste locations, contacts and employment opportunities.
Feminist political economy	Capitalist production draws upon labour reproduced through unpaid domestic and care work. The ideology that women are primarily housewives can obscure their productive contribution.	**Mies's Narsapur mechanism**: paid or income-generating production may remain undervalued because it is organised alongside reproductive responsibilities.

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Perspective	Explanation of women's position	What it makes visible
Intersectional feminist	Gender inequalities interact with caste, class, migration and locality, producing different constraints rather than one universal female experience.	Why a woman with assets and market access cannot simply be equated with a landless casual labourer or an isolated home-based piece-rate worker.
Interactionist and recognition-oriented	The social classification of a person's activity as "help" or as a worker's occupation affects recognition, identity and the legitimacy of claims.	The meaning attached to "housewife" or "helper". This is an interpretive application, not a claim that interactionist founders conducted the Narsapur study.
Agency, citizenship and collective action	Workers may mobilise identities and resources beyond the workplace to seek recognition, welfare and stronger negotiating positions.	Agarwala's evidence of organised informal workers and the importance of SEWA. Insecurity does not mean an absence of collective capacity.

Theoretical discipline: functionalism explains integration and its pathological distortions; Marxian approaches foreground accumulation and class power; Weberian analysis distinguishes class from status; feminist and intersectional approaches identify gendered reproduction and differentiated subordination; agency-focused approaches examine workers' capacity to change their circumstances.

Key concepts: eight definitions worth learning precisely

Concept	Origin or development	Precise meaning and use
Informal sector versus informal employment	Keith Hart's informal-sector analysis, **1973**; ILO statistical frameworks, **1993** and **2003**; Chen, **2012**.	The **informal sector** is identified through characteristics of production units; **informal employment** concerns jobs lacking defined formal arrangements or protections. Informal jobs may occur beyond informal enterprises. Contemporary ILO statistics further developed these distinctions in 2023.
Contributing family labour	ILO/ICLS employment-status classifications; measured in India's PLFS as helpers in household enterprises.	Work contributing to a household economic enterprise without the remuneration of an independently paid employment relationship. It is **employment**, not identical to unpaid domestic services.
Housewifisation	Developed in Maria Mies's feminist political economy, including her Narsapur research, **1982**.	The construction of women principally as housewives and secondary earners, even when their productive labour serves commercial markets. It can obscure work and help legitimise low remuneration.
Sexual division of labour and triple role	Feminist labour scholarship; Caroline Moser's **triple-role framework**, **1989**.	The social allocation of productive and reproductive responsibilities by gender. Moser distinguishes **productive, reproductive and community-management** work.
Second shift	Arlie Hochschild with Anne Machung, *The Second Shift*, **1989**.	The additional domestic and care work performed after paid employment. Originally studied in the United States; it is an analytical comparison, not an Indian empirical finding.

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Concept	Origin or development	Precise meaning and use
Subcontracting and home-based piece work	Long-established production arrangements; analysed in Mies's **1982** Narsapur study and later global production-chain research.	Tasks are distributed through intermediaries, with workers often paid per completed unit. Labour may remain at home while output reaches distant or formal markets.
Intersectionality	Kimberlé Crenshaw, **1989**.	A framework for examining how interacting systems of inequality produce experiences not captured by separate, single-axis categories. In India, it can be applied to gender, caste, class and migration, with attention to local historical conditions.
Empowerment and bargaining power	Bina Agarwal, **1994** and **1997**; Naila Kabeer, **1999**.	**Bargaining power** concerns the capacity to negotiate outcomes, shaped by assets, norms and fallback alternatives. **Empowerment** concerns effective strategic choice, assessed through resources, agency and achievements.

THE CONCEPT THAT PREVENTS A MAJOR MISTAKE

An unpaid helper in a household enterprise performs productive economic work recorded by employment statistics; someone providing unpaid domestic or caregiving services performs socially necessary work measured through time-use statistics, but the two categories are not interchangeable.

Indian evidence: ethnographies and field studies

Ethnography provides what headline employment figures cannot: the **organisation of work, household relationships, intermediaries, worker identities and practices of resistance**. The following works serve distinct evidentiary purposes and should not be treated as statistically representative of all Indian women.

Research and location	What the study documents	How to use it
Maria Mies, 1982 Narsapur, West Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh *The Lace Makers of Narsapur*	Women's lace production undertaken at home supplied commercial markets extending beyond India. Mies examined the sexual division of labour, caste distinctions, low remuneration and commercial relations that depended on women's socially constructed identity as housewives.	**Best illustration of Part 2.** The location of production inside the household does not make it economically separate from capitalist accumulation; patriarchal definitions of work can assist its undervaluation.
Geert de Neve, 2005 Textile industries, Tamil Nadu *The Everyday Politics of Labour*	Ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 1995 to 2000 across three Tamil Nadu textile industries examined everyday authority, class, caste, gender and worker resistance. The research challenges portrayals of informal workers as lacking political awareness or the capacity to act.	Explain that workplace relations are embedded in community and social hierarchies, while **informality does not mean workers cannot resist**.
Rina Agarwala, 2013 Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Maharashtra *Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India*	Research on construction and bidi workers, including interviews with 140 women members of workers' organisations, examined mobilisation around welfare boards, worker recognition and state benefits. Its comparative analysis found that collective gains varied across political settings.	**Best corrective to passive-victim narratives.** Informal workers can make claims as citizens and organise beyond conventional employer-based unions.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

Research and location	What the study documents	How to use it
Alessandra Mezzadri, 2017 Indian garment production networks *The Sweatshop Regime*	Investigates exploitation and oppression across factory and non-factory garment production, linking production sites, labouring bodies and the reproductive conditions sustaining work. Differentiation among workers forms part of the analysis.	Connect contemporary garment value chains with the **Marxian feminist understanding of production and social reproduction**.
A COLLECTIVE-ACTION CASE, SEPARATE FROM THE ETHNOGRAPHIES		
SEWA, established 1972 Ahmedabad, Gujarat; subsequently expanded nationally	The Self-Employed Women's Association began organising women in informal occupations, including vendors, home-based producers, domestic workers and other self-employed or insecure workers. Its trade-union, cooperative and financial initiatives demonstrate collective strategies for livelihood security and recognition.	Use as a **counter-example to inevitable powerlessness**. It establishes that organisation can improve opportunities, not that every member has achieved complete economic independence.

Field-study sources: Mies, Zed Press, 1982; de Neve, Social Science Press, 2005; Agarwala, Cambridge University Press, 2013, including the interview methodology; Mezzadri, Cambridge University Press, 2017; SEWA's movement history and ILO documentation. Each finding is specific to its research setting.

Indian evidence: what the national data actually show

Use the data to make an argument, not to fill space. Separate **participation**, **employment arrangement**, **remuneration**, **unpaid care** and **enterprise ownership**. Each measures a different dimension of women's position.

Source and indicator	Verified result	What it supports, and what it does not
PLFS Annual Report 2025 Employment status, usual status	Among employed women, **64.2%** were self-employed: 35.9% own-account workers or employers, and **28.3%** helpers in household enterprises. The corresponding share of employed men classified as helpers was **9.0%**.	Shows substantial gender differences in employment arrangements and women's participation as family-enterprise helpers. **Self-employment is not synonymous with informality**, and these figures do not establish who controls income.
PLFS Annual Report 2025 Rural versus urban	Among employed rural women, **32.9%** were helpers in household enterprises; among employed urban women, the figure was **11.8%**. Rural female self-employment was 70.7%, compared with 40.4% for urban women.	Demonstrates substantial variation by location. It cannot alone explain the effects of caste, education, assets or personal preference.
PLFS Annual Report 2025 Casual labour earnings	Average reported daily earnings among casual labourers engaged in work other than public works were approximately **Rs 489 for men** and **Rs 324 for women**, rural and urban combined.	Documents an **unadjusted gender earnings difference** for this defined category. It is not an equal-work comparison and does not isolate discrimination from differences in occupations, hours or other characteristics.
PLFS Annual Report 2025 Employment participation	Female LFPR, usual status, age 15 and above: **40.0%**. Female worker-population ratio: **38.8%**.	Establishes measured participation in employment and the labour force, not the share of women with formal jobs, secure wages or financial autonomy.
Time Use Survey 2024 Unpaid domestic work, age 15 to 59	Among participants in unpaid domestic services, women averaged **305 minutes** a day; men averaged **86 minutes**.	Demonstrates the gendered allocation of domestic services. It is **per participant** and is not restricted to informal workers.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

Source and indicator	Verified result	What it supports, and what it does not
Time Use Survey 2024 Unpaid caregiving, age 15 to 59	Caregiving participation: **41.0% of women** and **21.4% of men**. Among participants, average time was 140 minutes for women and 74 for men.	Supports the claim that care responsibilities are unequally distributed. It does not prove that every woman's informal employment is caused by caregiving.
ASUSE 2025 Unincorporated non-agricultural sector	About **27%** of proprietary establishments estimated within ASUSE 2025's unincorporated non-agricultural coverage were women-headed, compared with approximately 26.2% in ASUSE 2023-24. Women comprised around 29% of the estimated workforce.	Shows women's presence as proprietors and workers in the surveyed sector. Enterprise leadership is not automatically equal to personal control of profits or independent decision-making.
Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2026 Labour Codes	The ministry confirmed implementation of the four Labour Codes from **21 November 2025**, with provisions concerning wages, social security and unorganised and gig workers.	Establishes a changed **legal framework**. It does not establish universal benefit delivery, registration or enforcement among informal women workers.

Principal sources: MoSPI, PLFS Annual Report 2025, including its statements on employment status and earnings; MoSPI, Time Use Survey 2024, detailed report of 28 March 2025; MoSPI, ASUSE 2025, release of 24 March 2026; Ministry of Labour and Employment, Rajya Sabha reply of 5 February 2026.

The critical connection: why the figures must be read together

Observation	Sociological explanation	Limit of the inference
Many employed women are self-employed or helpers in household enterprises.	Household production and own-account activities form important parts of the organisation of women's work.	Neither category establishes that all such women are poor, insecure or without autonomy.
Women spend substantially more time on unpaid domestic and caregiving services.	The sexual division of labour shapes the time and mobility available for remunerated work.	Time-use differences establish unequal allocation, not a uniform causal pathway into informal employment.
Male and female casual workers report different average daily earnings.	Gendered segmentation and unequal bargaining positions are plausible explanatory mechanisms.	The aggregate difference is not proof of unequal pay for identical work.
Women also own unincorporated enterprises and organise collectively.	Women's position includes entrepreneurship, agency and citizenship-based collective action.	Participation in business ownership or an organisation does not guarantee empowerment in every dimension.

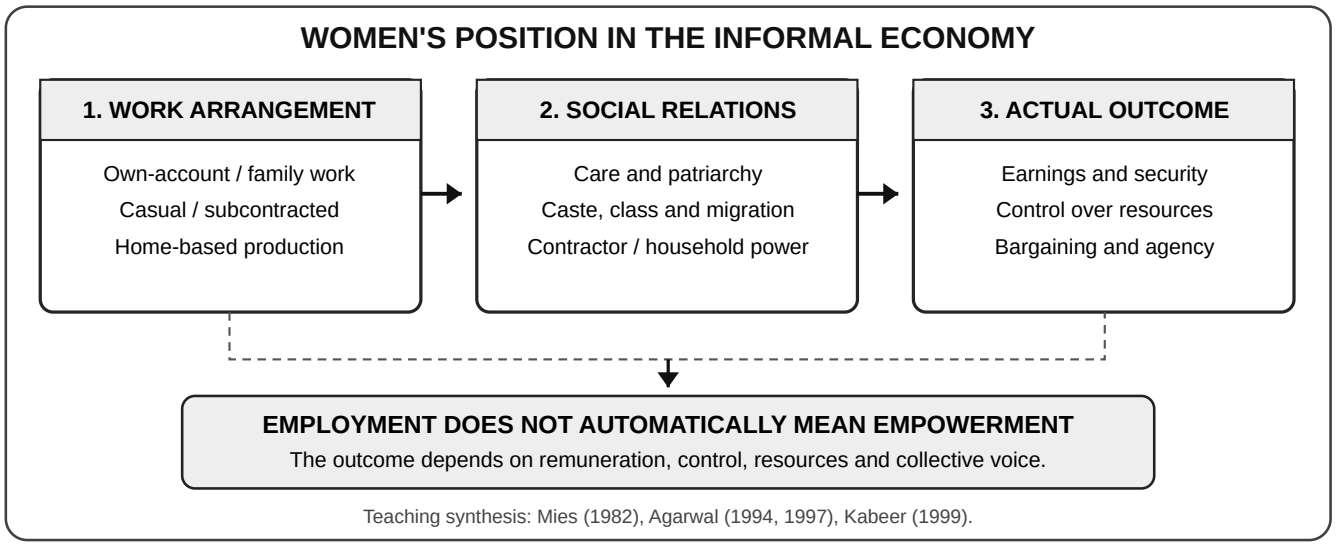
The statistical invisibility argument needs care. Feminist scholars identify the under-recognition of women's home-based and domestic contributions. However, it would be inaccurate to say that **all unpaid women's work is absent from official surveys**: PLFS records contributing family workers, while the Time Use Survey separately records domestic and care services. The issue is the boundary between forms of work, measurement and social recognition.

A cross-sectional earnings gap is not a causal estimate. The PLFS casual-wage figures can support a statement about observed average earnings differences. They do not, without further analysis, isolate wage discrimination from employment composition, location, hours, experience and other factors. The sociological task is to examine how these mechanisms may interact.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

One diagram to reproduce in the examination

The causal mechanism can be drawn as **three layers**: the organisation of production, the constraints imposed by social relations, and the actual distribution of benefits. This is a teaching diagram rather than an official statistical model.



Exam version: draw three rectangular boxes linked by arrows, then the one-line judgement beneath them. The diagram explains a relationship; the model answer still needs a thinker, an Indian example and an assessment.

The Paper I and Paper II bridge

This question belongs to Paper I, but its strongest applications are Indian. The link is not a separate paragraph to memorise. It is a way to move from **a general mechanism** to **an Indian social formation**.

Paper I: theory and concept	Paper II: application to Indian society
Formal and informal organisation of work: employment arrangements, subcontracting and unequal access to protection.	**Narsapur lace production**: home-based women workers incorporated into wider commodity markets without conventional factory employment.
Marxian political economy: exploitation, accumulation and labour-market power.	**Garment production networks**: Mezzadri's analysis of factory and non-factory settings connects production with reproduction and differentiated labour relations.
Weberian stratification: class situation, status and social closure.	**Caste and occupational opportunity**: analyse how inherited social hierarchy and unequal assets interact with gender in access to livelihoods; avoid assuming caste alone determines occupation.
Patriarchy and sexual division of labour: the relation between paid work and reproductive responsibilities.	**Indian household and kinship structures**: Bina Agarwal's analysis of property and bargaining shows why a woman's economic contribution need not translate into control.
Feminist work and social reproduction: the maintenance of labour power outside the direct wage relationship.	**Time Use Survey 2024**: gender differences in unpaid domestic services and caregiving demonstrate the continuing distribution of reproductive responsibilities.
Collective action and citizenship: alternative sources of workers' power.	**SEWA and Agarwala's research**: informal workers mobilise through unions, cooperatives, neighbourhood organisations and welfare claims.
Intersectionality: the interaction of distinct relations of inequality.	**Rural and urban labour arrangements**: PLFS shows different female employment distributions; ethnographic analysis is needed to examine caste, class and migration within these categories.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

THE PAPER I TO PAPER II BRIDGE IN ONE LINE

Informality is an organisation of economic work; in India, its gendered outcomes must also be understood through household relations, caste and class structures, migration, property relations and collective action.

TIER 2 · EXTENDED UNDERSTANDING: THE WHOLE TOPIC AROUND IT

Debates about the nature of the informal economy

The sociology of informality has moved beyond treating the informal sector as a temporary residue of traditional employment. The key debate concerns whether informal activities exist independently, as a survival response, or are actively linked to capitalist production and market restructuring.

Approach	Main proposition	What it explains, and its limit
Dualist	Informal work absorbs people unable to obtain employment in the modern formal sector; the two spheres are treated as relatively separate.	Highlights barriers to formal employment, but may understate how formal firms and markets depend upon informal producers.
Structuralist	Informal production is connected to formal capital through subcontracting, outsourcing and unequal market relationships.	Particularly useful for **Mies's Narsapur case**. Its limits arise if every self-employed worker is portrayed as dependent on a single capitalist buyer.
Legalist and voluntarist approaches	Some enterprises operate informally in response to regulatory conditions or deliberate choices; explanations vary between exclusion and strategic avoidance.	Recognises entrepreneurs and regulatory incentives, but cannot explain all poverty-driven, constrained or dependent work through voluntary choice.
Heterogeneous and relational approach	Informality contains multiple employment statuses and degrees of autonomy, security, productivity and market dependence.	**Chen's synthesis** is most useful for this question: it prevents the generalisation of one experience to every woman worker.

Conceptual source: Martha Alter Chen, The Informal Economy: Definitions, Theories and Policies, WIEGO Working Paper No. 1, 2012. These are analytical approaches, not mutually exclusive empirical descriptions of all informal activities.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

What feminist scholarship adds to classical labour theory

Production and reproduction

Marxian analysis explains capital accumulation, class relations and workers' dependence on the sale of labour power. Feminist political economy extends the analysis by asking how labour power is **reproduced**: through feeding, caring, maintaining households and sustaining workers across generations. These activities involve time and labour, often without direct remuneration.

Mies's Narsapur study shows that home-based production can serve capitalist commodity markets. **Moser's triple-role framework** adds that women may combine productive, reproductive and community-management responsibilities.

Resources and bargaining

Agarwal challenges models that treat the household as a single unit with perfectly shared interests. Household members may cooperate, but their relative bargaining power depends on property, independent resources, social norms and alternatives outside the relationship.

Kabeer further distinguishes access to resources from the ability to make strategic decisions and obtain valued outcomes. Together, these frameworks explain why the receipt of earnings is neither a sufficient nor a meaningless indicator of empowerment.

Five cautions about applying theory

Thinker or framework	What it explains well	What needs qualification
Marx	Capital accumulation, inequality in production relations and pressure on workers.	Class analysis alone does not fully account for unpaid care, intra-household power and the differentiated effects of gender.
Durkheim	The distinction between occupational differentiation and a division imposed by unequal external conditions.	His account of integration is not direct evidence about women's contemporary employment, and must not be used to justify customary gender assignments.
Mies	Patriarchal constructions of women's work within commercially connected home production.	Narsapur is a historically situated ethnography; its labour arrangement cannot be assumed to characterise every contemporary enterprise.
Agarwal and Kabeer	Control over resources, bargaining, agency and empowerment beyond simple employment counts.	These dimensions are difficult to measure with one economic indicator; preferences and choices are shaped by social conditions.
Intersectionality	Multiple, interacting dimensions of inequality.	It requires actual attention to particular caste, class and migration relations. Simply listing categories does not constitute an intersectional analysis.

How women's informal work has evolved

Development	Sociological significance	Continuing question
Home-based production	Mies documented the relationship between domestic ideology and commercially organised craft production in 1982. Later studies of home-based work and manufacturing show that dispersed production remains relevant.	Who controls contracts, orders, rates, equipment and access to buyers?
Globalised production chains	Production is distributed among factories, workshops and households, sometimes through multiple intermediaries. Mezzadri analyses the interplay of these locations and social relations.	Are commercial risks and costs transferred to less-protected workers?

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

How women's informal work has evolved (continued)

Development	Sociological significance	Continuing question
Collective organisation	SEWA and the organisations studied by Agarwala demonstrate political and economic action outside conventional factory-centred union structures.	Do collective gains improve material security and bargaining power, and for which workers?
Digital and platform-mediated work	Technology can facilitate market access and flexible scheduling, but may also enable platform-dependent access to tasks, variable earnings and new forms of oversight.	Does flexibility expand control, or shift uncertainty and care-related constraints onto workers?
Statistical visibility	PLFS and Time Use Survey measures now allow more precise distinctions between employment arrangements and unpaid services.	Can improved measurement be matched by recognition, effective rights and an equitable distribution of work?
Social-protection reform	The Labour Codes effective from November 2025 envisage expanded coverage and recognition for categories of workers outside traditional employment.	How far do registration, eligibility, enforcement and delivery translate legal provisions into actual protection?

Two debates worth knowing

Does informal work emancipate women or reproduce subordination?

One interpretation: earning through self-employment or home-based work can provide income, productive skills, business relationships and opportunities for mobility. ASUSE 2025 found that women headed about 60% of proprietary manufacturing establishments within its coverage, but only around 13% in trade and 15% in other services. Alongside collective movements such as SEWA, this shows possibilities for agency as well as unequal opportunities across occupations and markets.

The competing interpretation: Mies shows that production may be commercially valuable while women are defined as secondary earners. Care obligations, weak bargaining positions and low piece rates can preserve dependence even when women work for the market.

The balanced reading: neither employment nor informality establishes empowerment by itself. **Agarwal's resources and bargaining** and **Kabeer's resources, agency and achievements** provide a more complete test.

Is informalisation an inevitable consequence of capitalism or a condition that can be changed?

The structuralist interpretation: subcontracting and flexible employment arrangements can serve capital by dispersing labour, limiting employment obligations and transferring risks. Individual formalisation alone may not alter unequal relationships with buyers or intermediaries.

The agency-centred interpretation: Agarwala's research and SEWA demonstrate that informal workers can organise, make welfare claims and negotiate through the state, markets and collective institutions, even without conventional employment contracts.

The balanced reading: protection requires more than an automatic transition from "informal" to "formal". **Effective rights, social protection, collective bargaining and control over resources** matter, whatever the enterprise's registration status.

THE ONE ANALYTICAL INSIGHT FROM TIER 2

Women's informal work is neither merely a residual survival activity nor a uniform form of exploitation: its outcomes are produced through the interaction of economic organisation, social reproduction, stratification and agency.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

4 Pitfalls and variations

The six most consequential mistakes, claims that should not appear in a Sociology answer, and how to adapt the argument when UPSC changes the directive or the unit of analysis.

4.1 Six pitfalls, each with its correction

Listing disadvantages instead of examining a position

~~Women face exploitation, poverty, insecurity, harassment and low wages.~~

Identify employment arrangements and remuneration, then explain the gendered division of labour, production relations and control over resources that shape them.

Using thinkers as decorative names

~~According to Marx women are exploited; according to Weber they face inequality; according to feminism they are oppressed.~~

Explain the mechanism: Mies's housewifisation helps maintain low-paid home production within markets; Agarwal's bargaining framework tests whether earnings translate into independent control.

Confusing all unpaid work

~~Women doing household chores are informal employees, and no official data count them.~~

Distinguish unpaid contributing family employment recorded in PLFS from unpaid domestic and caregiving services recorded in the Time Use Survey.

Assuming every informal worker is identical

~~All informal women workers are poor, uneducated, exploited and without bargaining power.~~

Differentiate own-account workers, unpaid family helpers, casual workers and subcontracted producers; examine how caste, class, migration and resources modify their circumstances.

Treating participation as proof of empowerment

~~Female LFPR has increased; therefore informal employment has made women economically independent.~~

Use the distinction between earning and controlling income. Assess ownership, fallback resources, decision-making and opportunities for collective action.

Ending with a generic welfare prescription

~~Therefore the government should provide jobs, loans, schemes and education to improve women's conditions.~~

Conclude with a sociological judgement: the empowering potential of informal work depends on remuneration, social protection, redistribution of care, control over resources and bargaining power.

4.2 Never write these

- "Every self-employed woman is an informal worker."
  Employment status and informality are distinct classifications. Enterprise characteristics and the nature of the job also matter.
- "Women working as unpaid helpers are unemployed."
  Contributing family workers engaged in household enterprises can be classified as employed under PLFS.
- "All informal employment is illegal."
  Informality is not synonymous with criminality or unlawful economic activity.
- "Unpaid household services and unpaid family-enterprise labour are the same category."
  They concern different activities and are measured through different statistical frameworks.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

- "PLFS proves that 28.3% of Indian women receive no income."
  The 28.3% figure refers to the share of employed women classified as helpers in household enterprises in the 2025 usual-status employment distribution, not the entire female population.
- "Maria Mies proved that globalisation always impoverishes women."
  Her Narsapur study identified specific relations in home-based production for world markets; it does not establish a universal effect across all industries and periods.
- "Informal workers cannot organise because they have no fixed employer."
  SEWA and Agarwala's research document collective organisation and claims made by informal workers.
- "Patriarchy is the only reason women enter informal work."
  Gendered social relations interact with class, labour demand, assets, migration, regional opportunities and the organisation of production.
- "The casual wage figures prove unequal pay for identical work."
  National male-female averages are not adjusted comparisons for identical jobs, experience, hours or location.
- "Uma Chakravarti established that caste determines every woman's employment."
  Her analysis concerns historical structures connecting caste, gender and patriarchy. Contemporary employment outcomes require separate empirical analysis.
- "The Labour Codes guarantee social security to every informal woman worker."
  Statutory provisions and proposed coverage mechanisms must be distinguished from eligibility, registration, enforceable entitlements and actual delivery.
- "An increase in women's earnings always increases their household bargaining power."
  The effect depends on control over income, alternative resources, social norms and the wider relations in which earnings are received.

4.3 If the question changes

If UPSC asks	The structure becomes	What must change
Explain gender inequality in the informal sector.	Types of inequality; production and household mechanisms; caste and class differentiation; evidence.	Put **causal explanation** ahead of an extended evaluation of empowerment.
Critically examine the feminisation of informal labour.	Meaning and evidence of feminisation; demand-side and supply-side mechanisms; consequences; variation.	Establish whether the relevant data actually show a rising female share in the specified employment category and period.
Discuss the impact of globalisation on women informal workers.	Changes in production chains and labour demand; opportunities; insecurity and subcontracting; differentiated effects.	Make **global economic restructuring** the explanatory starting point, rather than the general condition of women's employment.
Examine unpaid women's work and its invisibility.	Different kinds of unpaid activity; production and reproduction; statistical and social recognition; implications.	Distinguish unpaid family-enterprise employment from domestic and care services. Use both PLFS and time-use evidence appropriately.
Evaluate the effect of informal employment on women's empowerment.	Define empowerment analytically; resources gained; limits to control and agency; contrasting cases; judgement.	Move **Agarwal and Kabeer** to the centre. Income, decision-making and achieved outcomes become the principal criteria.
Assess the role of caste and class in women's informal work.	Stratification mechanisms; access to occupations and assets; intersection with gender; field evidence; evaluation.	Make **intersectional differentiation** the main body, not a short final qualification.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

If UPSC asks	The structure becomes	What must change
Discuss informal women workers' collective mobilisation in India.	Organisational difficulties; unions and neighbourhood mobilisation; welfare claims; gains and limitations.	Use **SEWA and Rina Agarwala** as central evidence. Do not present workers only as recipients of state policy.
Compare formal and informal employment among women.	Employment relationships; remuneration; security; care obligations; overlaps and limits of the distinction.	A comparison table becomes suitable. Do not assume that every formal worker is secure or every informal worker is without agency.
The same question for **15 or 20 marks**.	Expand the three existing parts with formal and informal employment distinctions, Marxian and feminist perspectives, Mies, Agarwal, PLFS, time use and contrasting field studies.	Preserve the question-led sequence and the shorter final assessment of empowerment. Expand the sociological explanation and evidence, not unrelated schemes.

THE MISTAKE TO AVOID ABOVE ALL

Do not substitute a list of problems for a critical examination. The sociological answer must show what women's position is, which relations produce it, and why participation does not yield the same degree of empowerment for every woman.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

5 The model answer

The 153-word model answer below, including numbered headings, examines women's employment position, explains its social and economic causes, and assesses the unequal possibilities for empowerment. It combines feminist political economy, Indian evidence, bargaining theory and collective action.

Model answer **A critical, thinker-led assessment with Indian evidence** **153 words**

Women's informal labour sustains households and markets, yet participation need not ensure secure earnings, recognition or control over resources.

1. Women's position

Women work as own-account producers, casual labourers, home-based piece-rate workers and contributing family helpers. Occupational segregation, irregular pay, insecure conditions and patchy protection constrain them. **PLFS 2025** classified **28.3%** of employed women as household-enterprise helpers.

2. Forces shaping it

Marxian feminism links subcontracted production to unpaid care and patriarchal restrictions on mobility. In Narsapur, **Maria Mies (1982)** analysed **housewifisation**: women's productive labour was treated as supplementary, sustaining low pay in export-linked lace production. Caste and class further influence occupational access and bargaining.

3. Unequal empowerment

Migration, assets and work arrangements differentiate women's experiences. **Bina Agarwal's bargaining approach** shows why income without resource control or fallback options may not create autonomy.

Through SEWA-type collective organisation, informal work can expand agency; meaningful empowerment requires fair returns, social protection and shared care responsibilities.

DEMAND
Critically examine women's employment forms, earnings, working conditions, social protection, recognition and control over resources, explaining the structural causes.

HIDDEN DEMAND
Informal work does not automatically produce independence; empowerment varies by caste, class, migration, employment arrangement and bargaining power.

STRUCTURE
About two-fifths on women's position, two-fifths on the forces shaping it, and one-fifth on unequal experiences and the limits of empowerment.

BALANCE
Introduction 19 words, conclusion 20 words; 153 words in all

Why it works: The 153-word answer, including headings, links employment conditions to feminist political economy. Mies's Narsapur research explains a specific production arrangement; Agarwal tests whether earnings produce effective control. PLFS provides accurately described Indian evidence, while SEWA demonstrates collective agency. The conclusion makes empowerment conditional on resources, security and the distribution of care work.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

6 Other ways to write it

The model answer above remains the recommended answer. These outlines demonstrate different, equally valid ways to develop the same sociological argument. Every version must retain women's employment position, the forces shaping it, and a smaller final assessment of unequal empowerment.

Approach	How it is built	When it works
Thinker-led	**Part 1:** Identify employment forms, earnings and insecurity. **Part 2:** Mies explains housewifisation; feminist political economy explains unpaid reproduction and subcontracting. **Part 3:** Agarwal evaluates income, asset control and bargaining.	**Best alternative for Sociology Paper I.** The theory remains connected to the question rather than presented as a history of sociological thought.
Perspective-led	**Part 1:** Employment arrangements and unequal returns. **Part 2:** Marxian conflict analysis of production, feminist analysis of care and a Weberian account of unequal market opportunities. **Part 3:** Differential agency and a qualified judgement.	When the student can explain two or three theoretical mechanisms clearly without name-dropping.
India-evidence-led	**Part 1:** PLFS 2025 employment-status evidence and earnings insecurity. **Part 2:** Time Use Survey 2024 and Mies's Narsapur study, interpreted sociologically. **Part 3:** SEWA, Agarwala and the limits of generalisation.	When verified Indian material is the student's strongest recall tool. The explanation must still be sociological, not statistical reporting.
Employment-relations table	Use a compact table within Part 1: **own-account**, **casual**, **home-based piece-rate**, **contributing family labour**. Match each to a relevant question of remuneration or security. Explain causes in Part 2 and qualify empowerment in Part 3.	When a clear distinction among employment forms is the priority. A table may be visually expensive in 150 words.
Work to empowerment flow	**Part 1:** Types and conditions of work. **Part 2:** Care responsibilities, patriarchal relations and subcontracting. **Part 3:** Work → remuneration → control → bargaining power, with Agarwal as the analytical anchor.	When the student wants to make the hidden demand immediately visible. The arrows are a teaching simplification, not a claim that empowerment develops automatically in stages.

Which version to choose? The **thinker-led argument with one Indian statistic** is strongest for this question because the directive demands both explanation and assessment. Mies establishes a production mechanism, while Agarwal evaluates its consequences for autonomy.

What must never change? The answer cannot become only a comparison of employment types, only a feminist theory essay, or only a collection of PLFS findings. The three-part movement from **position to causes to unequal empowerment** must remain intact.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

7 Quick recall

Sixteen carefully selected facts, thinkers and empirical anchors. Learn what each item establishes and which part of the answer it belongs to; a remembered name without its concept is not a sociological argument.

1. **Keith Hart, 1973:** informal income opportunities among urban workers in Ghana; challenges the equation of non-formal work with economic inactivity.
2. **Karl Marx, 1867:** *Capital*, Volume I; accumulation, exploitation and the relative surplus population.
3. **Max Weber, 1922:** *Economy and Society*; class situation concerns market opportunities and life chances, distinct from status honour.
4. **Emile Durkheim, 1893:** *The Division of Labour in Society*; the forced division of labour concerns allocation distorted by unequal external conditions.
5. **Caroline Moser, 1989:** women's **triple role**: productive, reproductive and community-management work.
6. **Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989: intersectionality**; interacting structures of inequality cannot be understood through separate single-axis categories.
7. **Uma Chakravarti, 1993: Brahmanical patriarchy**; a historical framework connecting caste reproduction, gender regulation and social power.
8. **Martha Alter Chen, 2012:** informal economies are heterogeneous and linked to formal economic structures; employment and enterprise informality differ.
9. **Maria Mies, 1982:** *The Lace Makers of Narsapur*; Indian housewives producing lace for the world market.
10. **Housewifisation:** Mies's concept for the social construction of productive women primarily as housewives and secondary earners.
11. **Bina Agarwal, 1994 and 1997:** women's property rights, bargaining power, fallback resources and gender relations within and beyond households.
12. **Naila Kabeer, 1999:** empowerment assessed through **resources, agency and achievements**, not earnings alone.
13. **Rina Agarwala, 2013:** informal workers' neighbourhood mobilisation and citizenship-based welfare claims in India.
14. **PLFS 2025: 64.2%** of employed women were self-employed in usual status; **28.3%** were helpers in household enterprises.
15. **Time Use Survey 2024:** female participants aged 15 to 59 spent **305 minutes** daily on unpaid domestic services, against **86** for male participants.
16. **ASUSE 2025:** women owned **27%** of proprietary establishments in the surveyed unincorporated non-agricultural sector; **SEWA** was established in **1972**.

Precision reminder: PLFS employment-status percentages concern employed women; the Time Use Survey minutes are averages among activity participants aged 15 to 59; ASUSE covers a defined unincorporated non-agricultural sector. These are not interchangeable populations.

THE ONE SENTENCE TO CARRY OUT OF THIS DOCUMENT

Women's position in the informal economy is shaped not simply by whether they work, but by how labour is organised, how unpaid care and social hierarchies constrain them, and how far their economic contribution becomes control, security and bargaining power.

Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

8 Write it yourself

First write a fresh 150-word answer without consulting Section 5. Then use the seven checks below. If the argument is weak, revisit Sections 1 and 3 before comparing your response with the model answer. Prioritise explanation and judgement over the number of thinkers or examples.

	Check	Yes / No
1	Does the **introduction address the entire question**, connecting women's economic contribution with their employment conditions and control over returns?	
2	Does **Part 1** identify distinct employment forms and cover earnings, insecurity, social protection and the recognition of women's work?	
3	Does **Part 2 explain causes** through the gendered division of labour, unpaid care, patriarchal control and the organisation of production?	
4	Is at least one **thinker used to explain a mechanism**, especially Mies's Narsapur research or Agarwal's bargaining framework, rather than merely named?	
5	Is there a **specific, accurately described Indian example or statistic**, with no confusion between employment, unpaid family labour and domestic services?	
6	Does the smaller final part address **variation and the limits of empowerment**, including caste, class, migration or resources? Does the conclusion offer a balanced assessment?	
7	Is the answer within the **150 to 153 word house range**, counting headings and labels, with no unsupported claim from section 4.2?	

Sources

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Critically examine the position of women in the informal economy.

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YOUR NEXT STEP

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1 Write the full paper in three hours

2 Self-check this answer with section 8

3 Have the paper evaluated

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