



QUESTIONING THE EFFECTS OF DYNAMICS THAT INFLUENCE SOCIAL AWARENESS OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN TURKEY

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Turkey has accomplished important progress with regard to gender equality legislation. However, the situation of women in Turkey remains a source of concern in three interrelated areas: violence against women, low participation in the labor market, and access to education. Sections of society that are sensitive to the subject of women's rights will confirm that efforts to find a solution in these three problem areas need to be examined based on how efficient they have been. For this reason, it will be useful to evaluate each one separately. It is certain that the three topics that we have dealt with here concerning women's empowerment in Turkey are important. Concrete steps are being taken to develop educational opportunities for women and it can be seen from the statistics that these steps have yielded positive results over the years. However, the statistics show that positive results have not been obtained in women's employment and work is on-going. On the other hand, the prime minister has often given speeches asking families to have large numbers of children, and initiatives that will be implemented to encourage women to have many children appear in the press. As part of this policy, regulations that will enable women to retire two years earlier for each child that they have are being planned. These regulations, rather than supporting working mothers, are aimed at distancing women from working life and convincing them only to be mothers. It is possible to foresee that these approaches will make the gap between men and women in working life even wider. As for violence against women, the third subject that we dealt with here, it is the problem that requires the most urgent solution. It is a life-threatening obstacle standing in the way of women's empowerment. When it comes to women and honour, even writers, intellectuals and university graduates have been conditioned in ways that they are not necessarily conscious of. We have to accept that women are victims and we have to want them to be able to live in society with the same level of security as men. However, these good intentions are definitely not enough. The steps and initiatives that are taken need to be analysed to identify which goal they really serve. For progress to be made in women's rights, in parallel with the concrete steps that are taken, society must also analyse itself.

Keywords: "Status of women in Turkey", "Women's empowerment", "Women's education", "Violence against Women", "Female employment".

Introduction

Empowerment has been one of the most fashionable terms used by feminists and social work practitioners since the 1990s (Leung, 2005:429). Women's empowerment has been discussed in different contexts by many institutions, organizations and NGOs. (...) Various aspects of the subject—the economic, social and political aspects, for example—have attracted both academic and media interest, and there has been a great deal of research and study done on it. This interest has brought with it various different approaches to the subject and a plurality of opinions as to what 'empowerment' means and how it can be defined. Ultimately, each group has set out with a definition that is in accordance with the needs and priorities of its own field (Zihnioğlu, 2013:2). Given this diversity, it is not easy to formulate a comprehensive, unambiguous definition that will provide a conceptual framework for this study. On this point, Kabeer's (1999) definition, which sees women's empowerment as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 1999:435) may be adopted. At the same time, this definition also directly and indirectly covers the key elements of women's empowerment that are prominent in the theoretical and empirical literature on the subject. These elements may be given as follows: the right to have the power to lead her own life inside and outside the home, the right to have life choices and to be able to make them freely, the right of access to opportunities and resources, and self-respect (Zihnioğlu, 2013:2). Women's empowerment, from this perspective, will also entail overcoming the defence mechanisms aimed at preserving the existing balance of society. In this respect, the economic and social changes and developments taking place in Turkey, as in many other countries in the world today, and the reshaping of the gender-based division of labour can be thought of as an opportunity. The fluidity that these changes have created in society may be seen as a chance to eradicate the longstanding unjust treatment of women. However, existing practices need to be examined in this sense: Women, far from seeing any improvement in their unfavourable position in the past, are in an even worse situation because new burdens have been imposed on them. In addition, conflicts resulting from social transformation have also increased the level of violence against women. This violence, especially when it escalates into murder, receives broad media coverage. As is examined below in the section on violence against women, these cases, which attract the attention of the whole public, are not used to create problem-solving transformations in social consciousness.

The European Stability Initiative report drawn up by Špidla (2004) and entitled "Empowering Women in Turkey: A Priority in the Pre-Accession Process" contains the following assessment: Turkey has accomplished important progress with regard to gender equality legislation. However, the situation of women in Turkey remains a source of concern in three interrelated areas: violence against women, low participation in the labor market, and access to education (Špidla, 2004). Sections of society that are sensitive to the subject of women's rights will confirm that efforts to find a solution in these three problem areas need to be examined based on how efficient they have been. For this reason, it will be useful to evaluate each one separately.

Education

Education, together with life expectancy and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, is one of the three basic indicators of the Gender-Related Development Index (GDI), one of the principal international measures used to gauge gender inequality. Turkey, which was ranked 69th out of

174 countries (data available for 143) in the Gender-Related Development Index from the UN Development Program's (UNDP) Human Development Report in 2000, ranked 79th out of 177 countries (data available for 157) in the 2007-2008 Report. Based on gender inequality in adult literacy rates, Turkey ranked 111th out of 152 countries in the same index. Turkey's position in the Human Development Index (HDI) (84th out of 177 countries) is much lower than its position calculated according to Gross Domestic Product (66th out of 174 countries). We see then that one of the factors that pulls Turkey down in the Human Development Index rankings, which are heavily weighted for education, is gender inequality (UNDP, 2006; UNDP, 2007; ABHABER. EU, 2007).

Turkey accepted without reservation the documents that were agreed to at the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing (the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action). The Beijing Platform for Action identified twelve critical areas of concern for women's advancement and empowerment. One of these critical areas, "Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to education and training", directly concerns women and education (KSGM, 2008:8).

In Turkey, while 28% of women were illiterate as of 1990, ten years later, according to the 2000 census, this had fallen to 19.4%. According to the same census, this rate is 6.1% for men. In 2006, the adult literacy rate, which includes the population aged 24 and above, was 80.4% for women and 96% for men. For every 100 illiterate men, there were 309 women (KSGM, 2008:8-9).

When we look at school-aged children as well, we can see that the situation is below the desired level. 3.8% of a total of 3.3 million girls in the 6-14 age group (primary-school age) do not go to school. To a large extent, girls who are not sent to school or who leave school early help with agricultural activities or housework; families take their daughters out of education because they think that their economic gains will be greater. However, it can be said that extending the compulsory period for uninterrupted basic education to 8 years in 1997 contributed to schooling rates for girls rising at all levels and to girls staying in education for longer (KSGM, 2008:10).

Statistics show that progress has been made in women's education over the years, albeit not at the rate that would have been hoped for. As Robinson-Pant (2004, 474) said, "Women's education is a good thing" (Zihnioğlu, 2013:6). (...) However, the tendency to equate rates of schooling for women with empowerment, without observing that there may be other factors in the meantime, is problematic. (...) Women attending school does not necessarily result in women's empowerment. The content of the education provided is also at least as important as the length of that education. If education, as well as providing knowledge and self-confidence, can also create gender awareness, it can contribute to women's empowerment. Even if an education system that does not provide gender awareness did create women with high self-confidence, they may still think that their place is in the home and they may choose not to become economically or socially active. Therefore, an education that—in addition to developing knowledge, understanding and self-confidence—could also provide gender awareness would pave the way for genuine women's empowerment (Murphey-Graham, 2008:43). While aiming for women's empowerment through education though, we should never lose sight of how important the particular socio-cultural structure in which women find themselves is. Malik and Courtney (2011) found that women in Pakistan who have entered higher education are more aware of their legal rights, but that they do not use these rights for fear that this might distance them from their families (Zihnioğlu, 2013:6).

While an education system that ignores these conditions may increase a woman's productivity at work, it cannot provide her with the power to transform the restrictive aspects of the responsibility and role that she has taken on (Kabeer, 2005:15). Being empowered means being able to change things. Women can be considered to be empowered, not only when their material conditions improve, but also when they have the power to change their social, political and economic position in society (Johnson, 2005:57).

Participation in the Labour Force

In Turkey, participation of women in the labor market remains very low (an employment rate of 24% in 2005 compared with 56% in the EU), one of the lowest amongst OECD countries. Female unemployment is on the rise. There is a strong gender divide in the labor market, partly coinciding with the urban/rural and regional divides. Women's activities are highly concentrated in agriculture and unpaid employment (Špidla, 2004). Thus, according to data for 2007, even though it appears as if more women are part of the labour force in rural areas (32.7%) compared to the city (20.2%), 83 out of every 100 rural women are working in the agricultural sector and 77% of these are working as unpaid family workers. Throughout Turkey, 47.3% of women who are employed work in the agricultural sector, 14.2% in the industrial sector and 38.5% in the services sector (KSGM, 2008:23).

In Turkey, female employment continues to be one of the fundamental problem areas. Across Turkey, while the rate of female participation in the labour force was around 34.1% in 1990, it was 26.9% in 2002, 25.4% in 2004 and 24.8% in 2007. In spite of the egalitarian structure of the law, the fact that the necessary mechanisms to enable women's qualitative development and entry into the labour market have not emerged is one of the main reasons why rates of female participation in the labour force show a decrease over the years (KSGM, 2008:23).

Turkey has experienced a high level of emigration from villages to cities and women who were part of the labour force in villages are not able to enter the urban labour market when they come to the city because they do not have sufficient education or professional knowledge and skill, so they generally remain outside the labour force as housewives. Out of every 100 women who do not participate in the labour force, 63 give being a "housewife" as the reason why. This phenomenon reduces female participation in the labour force in both rural and urban areas. Women who have to work because they need the income have to work in low-status, low-income jobs without social security (KSGM, 2008:23).

In the absence of a comprehensive social security and welfare system, for many people, family and kinship bonds take the place of state social security and welfare. The family's central position in perpetuating and reproducing the social structure undoubtedly results in women's principal roles in society being wife and mother. (...) Women's roles in the system are not confined to domestic services and care for children or the elderly; they also have important duties that ensure the continuation of the family's mutual support networks based on kinship and regional affiliation (Dedeoğlu, 2009:45). Throughout Turkey, according to data from 2006, while the informal employment rate was 48.5%, 66% of working women were working informally (Toksöz, 2007:5).

Violence against Women

Domestic violence against women remains an important problem across Europe, and Turkey is no exception. Honor killings are also a major concern, especially in the South East (Şpidla, 2004). According to results of research on domestic violence against women in Turkey, in the country as a whole, the percentage of women who state that they have experienced physical violence at some point in their life is 39.3%. The percentages of women suffering physical violence range between 25.6% and 53.2% depending on the geographical region. Approximately one out of every two women living in the South East Anatolian region stated that she had experienced physical violence. While 39.3% of women have experienced physical violence and 15.3% have experienced sexual violence in the country as a whole, the fact that 41.9% of women have experienced at least one of these two forms of violence shows that sexual violence occurs together with physical violence (KSGM, 2009:47).

Violence against women remains a serious problem that often even escalates into murder. In one of the murders that received wide press coverage, the words of the mayor of Diyarbakır, the city where the incident occurred, constituted an emotional protest and reveal the seriousness of the situation:

“Violence against women is an outrage, an infamy. Whatever you call it, be it jealousy, or be it an honour killing, it is one of this society’s biggest disgraces. Over two thousand women a year suffer violence at the hands of men. On average, five or six women a day are murdered, also at the hands of men. The law, unfortunately, is not enough to protect women. This is, above all, a massacre of women. Society has a responsibility, on every level—morals, conscience, politics—to oppose this; it is our duty. I want to make an appeal to society. The unhealthy male attitude, especially, needs to be changed and treated. Call it by whatever name you want, murdering women just because they are women is the mark of a psychopath. If killing a woman, killing the person closest to you is being a man, then damn that sort of manhood. I reject that sort of manhood. I trample it under foot.” (Öldürülen kadını hemcinsleri defnetti, 2013).

The victim of the murder in question was a 22-year-old woman. She had left her husband and was in the process of getting a divorce; she was killed by her father-in-law when she came to her husband’s city to take her child away to live with her. Many of the newspapers that covered the story did not mention claims that she was living with another man. The attempt to make the women who are killed appear “innocent” according to the value judgements of the community is widespread in both society and the media. In this respect, the fact that the mayor of Diyarbakır did not simply follow the values of society, but instead went ahead of them by standing up for the victim, was an extraordinarily progressive stance. No one, including her family, claimed her body from the morgue. No one in the city performed her funeral prayers either. This is proof that the city considered her to be guilty. An average reader who read the story as it appeared in the newspaper would understand that a young woman who wanted to get divorced because she could not get along with her husband had been killed. Although the reader would have thought that this murder was wrong, it would not have occurred to them that it was actually a settling of scores based on their own society’s notions of honour.

“Girl who fell victim to honour killing turns out to be a virgin.” (Namus cinayetine kurban giden genç kız bakire çıktı, 2013). This was the headline of a story that appeared in many newspapers in 2004. It was about an 18-year-old girl who was killed by her elder brother on the grounds that she was having a relationship with a man. As can be seen from the headline, the readers are told that she was a virgin, in other words, “innocent” according to the values of society. More importance is ascribed to her virginity than to the murder.

“Girl killed for honour was a virgin after all.” (Namus yüzünden öldürülen kız bakire çıktı, 2013). This too is another news headline and it reports that a girl who was strangled by her grandfather because there was gossip suggesting that she was having relationships with men was actually a virgin.

“Woman killed for cheating was innocent all along.” (Aldattı diye öldürülen kadın masum çıktı, 2013). This story is about a young woman who had her throat slit by her husband on the grounds that she was cheating on him. The husband’s claim that he had been provoked was examined by the court and it was decided that the victim had not been cheating on her husband. She had been writing over the internet and this made her husband believe that she was being unfaithful; however, she had not been writing to other men, but to her mother and father in Germany.

More examples could be provided. What they all have in common is a report to the public that the victims have committed no “crime” that would “require” them to be killed for honour. The lawyer for the killers in one of these cases, claiming that the prosecution were deceiving the public, used exactly these words in his defence: “Some people here see their honour as more precious than life itself. Like loving your country, like loving God. The killing of this woman was not a straightforward murder. *Gülistan Gümüş* was not innocent.” (Namus candan öte. Öldürülen kadın masum değil, 2013). As we see, even someone who has had a university education looked no further than whether the woman who was killed had stepped outside the bounds of honour or not.

For one of the murders above, readers’ comments on the web page of the newspaper where the story appeared are such as to show where the public stands on this issue. One of the readers mentioned that they lived where the murder was committed and they were well acquainted with the case; they wrote an explanation to counter the vilification of the family that committed the murder. It contained the information that the woman who was killed had run away from her husband and had been living with another man. Another reader who commented on the same story stated that they thought that it was wrong to try to show that either party was innocent. This comment was not aimed at condemning honour killings.

Stories of girls who are killed by their relatives because they have been raped are also frequently encountered. The story of the person who was killed even though she had not done anything “dishonourable” is told in dramatic language and the killers are condemned for their barbarity.

When we examine the ways that murders are reported to the public and the public’s reactions to them, drawing conclusions from the cases that make the news, we can clearly see that honour killings are not condemned in themselves, independently of their motives. The subtext could even be read like this: “We think that the murder that made the news is wrong and we condemn it because the victim was killed even though she did not step outside the bounds of honour that were drawn up for her.” However, these attention-grabbing cases are an opportunity to give a message that could transform values. The media does not use the power that it has to shape society in order to argue that the victims’ right to life is inviolable regardless of their morality. On the contrary, the way that it reports these murders incites the murderers of the future. If potential killers are sure that the female victim in their own situation has stepped outside the bounds of honour that have been drawn up, they will not think that society will condemn the murder that they want to commit. Thus, research by Bağlı and Özensel (2011) on people who have committed honour killings has shown that the killers see themselves as right.

Perceptions of Women in Turkey: Historical Roots and Today

Throughout the socialisation process, one group relies on a subtle form of power in order to obtain social control. Accordingly, individuals learn to want whatever is to the advantage of the dominant group. In the majority of societies, women learn to accept and internalise male dominance; they find their subordinate role in life appropriate, or even desirable, either because they believe in this kind of dominance or else because they feel that they have no other choice (Sullivan, 2003:227).

The general perception in Turkey is that women need to get married; not being able to find a husband is generally agreed to be a major shortcoming. Sayings such as “Kocam olsun da cüce olsun” [which can be loosely translated as “just give me a husband even if he’s a dwarf”] point out that a husband is absolutely necessary, regardless of what his personal qualities might be.

Turkish society tends to be influenced by oral culture, of which legends and epics are important components. Although they are no longer kept alive, this should not lead us to overlook the uninterrupted influence that they have had on social consciousness from the past until the present day. Even more importantly, legends and epics are not created outside society and then imposed on culture. They are born from the values of the culture that creates them. By looking at what epics exhort us to do, it is also possible to have an idea about the values of society today. We pointed out above that, on the subject of women’s empowerment, Kabeer (1999) emphasises that women in particular had been denied the ability to make strategic life choices. It is illuminating to look at the Oğuz Han epic (Ögel, 1997), one of the most important Turkish epics, through this optic. Oğuz Han marries two of his cousins but he cannot persuade them to convert to Islam. Because of this, he will not look at either of them; he will not even lay a finger on them. Later, Oğuz Han goes his third cousin, who is less attractive than the other two, and says that he will marry her as long as she converts to Islam. Here is how she replies:

I’ll not follow Allah’s demands; to Tengri I’ll pay no heed!

Your word is my command; I’ll always take your lead!

Whatever you say shall be; all you decree I’ll do!

While you’re in charge of me, I’ll only have eyes for you! (Ögel, 1997:54).

She converted to Islam because Oğuz Han, her husband, wanted her to. Oğuz Han, while a babe in arms, did not drink his mother’s milk for three days because she was not a Muslim. In other words, the epic especially emphasises how important religious belief is. In the wife selection scene that follows this, this message is very clear: the ideal wife should be dependent on her husband even when it comes to religion.

It is plausible that the messages that were conveyed by legends and epics in the past are transmitted to members of society today in a different form. In Turkey, there is a widely known saying that is used as a joke, especially by young women: “Ben bilmem beyim (kocam) bilir,” [which can be loosely translated as, “Don’t ask me, ask my husband”]. A young woman in a restaurant could point to her husband and say it jokingly if a friend asks her what she wants to eat. The humorous use of this saying could also be interpreted as an attempt to neutralise a message that society is trying to adopt. From such behaviours, we can conclude that women in the new generation are demanding a change in their positions vis-à-vis their husbands.

Television is a very important part of the mass media because it relays elements that go to form a large part of social life. According to Fiske (1990:1), television is a means of cultural influence that enables the circulation of meanings. Statistics show that rates of television viewing in Turkey are rather high. A study carried out by the Radio and Television Supreme Council [the Turkish state regulator] based on a total of 2570 people in 21 [out of 81] provinces found that

20.5% of the sample group watched television for an average of three hours a day midweek, 17.2% for two hours, 16.4% for four hours and 4.5% for ten hours or more. When the average length of time per day spent watching television midweek is broken down according to gender, women watch 4.5 hours of television and men 4.1 hours (RTÜK, 2009).

In the primetime hours, between eight and eleven o'clock in the evening, all the main channels show serials. (...) The general logic of these serials, which keep whole families of viewers at home entranced, is to keep people glued to the screen, regardless of class, culture or age (Pişkin, 2008:43). The transformational effect that serials have on society is especially important and the subject of another study. However, we still think that it is worth making a general assessment about where these serials stand in the context of women's empowerment.

There is a rape at the heart of a serial called "Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne?" ["What Did Fatmagül Do Wrong?"], one of the most watched serials of 2010-2012. A young woman is gang-raped by a group of men and consequently has to break off her engagement to the man who she had dreamt of marrying. The young woman is married off to someone who was part of the group that gang-raped her. This marriage is only for show and there is no husband-wife relationship between them. In subsequent episodes, the young husband, who is in love with his rape-victim wife, manages to win her heart. It becomes clear that, although he acted together with the rapists during the attack, he did not rape her himself. The other rapists, however, are punished by the law thanks to the efforts of the victim and her husband.

This serial, which was adapted from a novel, does not actually send any progressive message to social consciousness. Society's view of rape and its way of solving the problems arising from rape have only been disguised by the dramatic elements that adorn the plot. The woman who was "sullied" was married off to one of the criminals who was responsible for her being "sullied". The actual rapists were punished by the law. The person who was responsible for, but did not directly take part in her rape was also "punished", in a way, by marrying a woman who was "sullied" and "no longer intact". That such a plot emerged from a writer's imagination before being accepted and watched by the public at large shows that traditional, reactionary attitudes remain, even in the minds of intellectuals.

"Muhteşem Yüzyıl" ["The Magnificent Century"], one of the most watched serials in Turkey today, takes place during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, one of the Ottoman sultans. The most powerful character in the serial is the sultan himself, and the power struggles between his wives have a very important place in the plot. The women are only as powerful as how close they have succeeded in getting to the sultan, the real holder of power. This serial too clearly emphasises the subordinate position of women and this is definitely not approached critically. That men should be the real holders of power is shown in a positive light.

We cannot give examples of serials that are very similar to the above without repeating ourselves. The general framework, however, is always the same. Serials approve the master-slave relationship and tell how everyone, women included of course, will be happier if they know their place. Women, first and foremost, have to obey the strict rules that are applied to them so that order can run smoothly. There are no problems as long as women reconcile themselves to their traditional roles (Pişkin, 2008:44).

Conclusions

The Human Development Report 1995 stresses that empowerment is about participation: Development must be by people, not only for them. People must participate fully in the decisions and processes that shape their lives (UN, 1995:12). [B]ut at the same time [the Report] promotes

a rather instrumentalist view of empowerment; [i]nvesting in women's capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices is not only valuable in itself but is also the surest way to contribute to economic growth and overall development (UN, 1995:iii).

For Oxfam(1995), empowerment is about challenging oppression and inequality: Empowerment involves challenging the forms of oppression which compel millions of people to play a part in their society on terms which are inequitable, or in ways which deny [them] their human rights.

Feminist activists stress that women's empowerment is not about replacing one form of empowerment with another: Women's empowerment should lead to the liberation of men from false value systems and ideologies of oppression. It should lead to a situation where each one can become a whole being regardless of gender, and use their fullest potential to construct a more humane society for all(Akhtar, 1992). Rowlands (1995:104) points out that empowerment is a bottom-up process and cannot be bestowed from the top down.

It is certain that the three topics that we have dealt with here concerning women's empowerment in Turkey are important. Concrete steps are being taken to develop educational opportunities for women and it can be seen from the statistics presented above that these steps have yielded positive results over the years. Efforts are also being made by the state and NGOs to improve the situation of women in working life. However, the statistics show that positive results have not been obtained in this area and work is on-going. On the other hand, the prime minister has often given speeches asking families to have large numbers of children (Başbakan bu kez '5 çocuk' dedi, 2013), and initiatives that will be implemented to encourage women to have many children appear in the press. As part of this policy, regulations that will enable women to retire two years earlier for each child that they have are being planned (10 yıl erken emeklilik müjdesi, 2013). These regulations, rather than supporting working mothers, are aimed at distancing women from working life and convincing them only to be mothers. It is possible to foresee that these approaches will make the gap between men and women in working life even wider. It is understandable that an insufficient rate of population growth might be a problem for the country. However, the burden of keeping the population at a level that will ensure the continuation of society should not be placed on women's shoulders as per the conventional way. It should be borne in mind that women currently lag behind in working life, and care should definitely be taken to make sure that policy decisions do not make the gap become even wider.

As for violence against women, the third subject that we dealt with here, it is the problem that requires the most urgent solution. It is a life-threatening obstacle standing in the way of women's empowerment. When it comes to women and honour, even writers, intellectuals and university graduates have been conditioned in ways that they are not necessarily conscious of. There is an unhealthy male attitude that was even explicitly mentioned in the mayor of Diyarbakır's protest speech. Of course, in solving the problem of violence, as in other problems, good intentions are important. We have to accept that women are victims and we have to want them to be able to live in society with the same level of security as men. However, these good intentions are definitely not enough. The steps and initiatives that are taken need to be analysed to identify which goal they really serve. For progress to be made in women's rights, in parallel with the concrete steps that are taken, society must also analyse itself. In the process of eradicating the unjust treatment of women, the right path can be found with the help of these analyses. Of course, the facts that are brought to light as a result of these analyses cannot be enforced. For example, defenders of women's rights cannot intervene in television channels' choice of serials once they have brought their subtexts out into the open, nor can they determine the way that the media reports the news either, but bringing the message that is given through the

media up to the surface and displaying it will reduce its damaging effects. Also, as the number of journalists and writers who can look at the problem in an informed way increases, it is logical to expect that the ways in which literary works and news stories are presented will be transformed.

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