

## **Gender Relations and Women's Off-farm Employment: a critical analysis of discourses.**

### **End of Project Report 5407 Women in Agriculture**

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#### **Summary**

This project addresses gender relations on dairy farms in Irish Republic. Its aim was to explore the way women who are married to farmers but who are employed in paid employment off the farm are constructed in agricultural policy discourse. It was proposed that discourses encapsulate the values and interests of powerful actors and are constitutive in their effect. Hence they are implicated in women's experience of life within a 'farm family'. Following on from this it may be said that women's continued subordination in Irish farming or indeed their chances of achieving equal status are circumscribed by dominant discourses.

However, women are recognised as active agents who are able to resist the full effects of dominant discourses by various means. Off-farm employment is seen as one aspect of resistance, in spite of its construction as a family strategy to ensure farm household viability. Women's discourses provide insights into their experiences and their practices which both reconstruct and reinforce gender relations on farms.

#### **Introduction**

Much feminist analysis of 'farm women' in Ireland has sought to demonstrate the commonality of their experience within a patriarchal structure (eg. Heenan and Birrell, 1997; O'Hara, 1998; Shortall; 1999). In general, analysis has tended to focus on highlighting the hidden work of women on Irish farms. Time and type of labour expended in the *fields and farmyards* forms one aspect of the analysis, with a second aspect aimed at illuminating how 'domestic work' supports the

production and reproduction of the farm enterprise. Women's off-farm employment is recognized as a significant factor in the ongoing viability of many farm enterprises (Shortall, 2002; Heenan and Birrell, 1997) however there is limited research in the Republic of Ireland on the impact of women's off-farm paid employment on gender (power) relations or indeed gender identities. In particular, there has been little focus on the unified farm family which tends to be presented in official discourse is

This project was primarily concerned with an exploration of gender relations and women's off-farm paid employment. It rests on the premise that the Irish state has a particularly intimate relationship with Irish agriculture. Moreover, it demonstrates how the values and ideologies which underpin the structure of Irish farming are evident in official agricultural discourses. A critical analysis of these discourses exposes their disciplinary nature and their constitutive effects on the subjective experience of women on farms. However, women's off farm employment acts as another site of subjective understanding which offers the potential to renegotiate or resist the normative position of women in relation to farming. The exploration of women's discourses alongside official discourses reveals the tensions which exist in the process of 'being made' and 'self-making' (Ong, 1996).

The research focused on women who were married to dairy farmers and who were in paid employment off the farm.<sup>1</sup> Dairy farmers are less likely to engage in paid work off the farm than farmers in other farming sectors.<sup>2</sup> This means that that household income sources outside of farming are more likely to be generated by spouses. The status of these earnings in relation to farm viability was of particular interest primarily because of the general proposition that women's work is part of a 'family strategy' (Phelan and Frawley, 2000) and the underlying assumption of unified household goals.

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<sup>1</sup> Marriage is used here to refer to all conjugal relationships.

<sup>2</sup> In 2005, the incidence of dairy farmers engaging in paid employment off the farm averaged across farm size was 13% on specialist dairy farms and 15% on 'Dairy/ Other' farms. This compares to an average across farm size of between 38% and 50% in other farming systems (Teagasc, 2005).

The findings highlight how women who are engaged in paid work off the farm, understand and develop a sense of 'self' within the context of Irish agricultural discourses which continue to privilege and reinforce the interests and status of farmers (predominantly male). It provides a more nuanced insight into the 'farm family' which will prove useful to policy and programme makers. It has raised questions about women's experiences within the 'farm family', their level of engagement with the business, their satisfaction with a lifestyle which demands considerable time and resources and which many feel does not provide the rewards and opportunities which are perceived as commonplace in a changing Ireland. Moreover, it shows how women's paid employment provides another site of meaning, which can result in women constructing a sense of self disassociated from farming. The willingness of women to endure the everyday effects on household and family life of agricultural restructuring is a pertinent factor in the future of the family farm.

### **Methodology**

The methodological approach was informed by both feminist and post-structuralist theory. In particular, the work of Michel Foucault provided insights into the workings of government and the constitution of subjectivity. Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality draws attention to the way modern states exercises power, not generally as a matter of force but rather by inducing the desired behaviour in individuals, a government of the self. Individuals believe themselves to be acting freely while their actions are circumscribed by the subjective position they embrace. Policy in this regard can be understood as part of the process in which new norms of conduct are adopted and internalised by individuals, official discourses show how these conducts are engineered and promoted by government and state organisations. This idea that individuals participate in their own subjectification is not new. Marx writings on consciousness and Gramsci's work in relation to hegemony shared a similar position. Louis Althusser (1971) also recognised the workings of interlocking

networks of power in the reproduction of relations of production which underpinned capital social relations through the work of *ideological state apparatuses* such as schools, the church, media, culture etc.

However, alongside this focus on official discourses, feminism alerts us to the importance of women's experience. Standpoint feminism, building on the work of Georg Lukás (1971) and proposes that women have privileged insight into the workings of the social system because not only are they exploited within the current system they have an interest in its change. Thus standpoint feminism suggests that women as 'knowing subject' have an understanding of the world which men are unable to comprehend. While open to criticism, particular from postmodernist feminists who contest the idea of a *singular* alternative voice, the idea that women's subjective experience should be included in analysis informed this research.

So, taken together these theories informed an epistemology position which recognised the importance of the subjective in understanding how power relations structure society and suggested a two stranded interrelated analysis of official and women's discourses. It is rooted in an understanding of discourse as constitutive of knowledge (of what is understood as 'truth') and the forms of subjectivity, power relations, and social practises inherent in that knowledge (Weedon, 1997). It draws on Foucault's claim that discourses are 'practises that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972).

The first strand then, explored Irish state discourses pertaining to agricultural policy and the way they constructed women who are married to farmers. Discourses are credited with an ability not only to construct 'objects' (e.g. the farmer's wife, the farm family etc), but also the subjective understandings and experiences of individuals. This exploration provided insights into how women have been discursively constructed as responsible for the overall well-being of the farm household and, through its proper and skilful management, ultimately

the future economic survival of the farm itself. More recently, a second level of responsibility has been extended through the notion of *pluriactivity* whereby women's off-farm labour is presented as evidence of a family *strategy* to remain in farming. This construction of women's paid employment as a unified strategic response by the household to agricultural restructuring is reinforced by the continued identification of women married to farmers as 'farmer's wives' or 'farm women' and indeed as members of a 'farm family'.

Official discourses do not exist outside society; they are both produced in and reproductive of their cultural context. In this sense, they can be regarded as encapsulating 'the entire history and culture of the society that generated them' (Shore and Wright, 1997: 7) and thus illuminating the social context within which women on farms actively make sense of their lives. The concept of a policy paradigm proved useful. Denis O'Sullivan (1993; 1999) alerts us to the need to consider what is below the surface, even where policy appears to be clearly documented. Taking the elements of a paradigm into account directs us to consider what is beyond or beneath the formal statements, the assumptions, ideas, values, discourses, identity of authoritative speakers and the content of authoritative statements. In this strand, two sets of texts were analysed. The first was associated with the Farm Home Advisory Service (FHAS) and the second with the Report of the Advisory Committee on Women in Agriculture (RACWA, Department of Agriculture, 2000). Relevant official statements, including Dáil speeches were also included in the corpus of research material.

The second strand was concerned with women's discourses and comprised both a postal survey of 450 women whose circumstances matched the research criteria and follow up ethnographic interviews with 15 women. The original purpose of the questionnaire was primarily a means of identifying women to participate in the interviews. However, it was decided that the questionnaire was a useful instrument to gather some information on women in the research field. In addition to socio – demographic information, data was collected on the domestic

division of labour, financial matters and the both men's and women's involved in household and farm decision making. The questionnaire also provided an opportunity to explore women's use of identity banners<sup>3</sup> (O'Donovan, 2006) and for women to express their views on farming. Women were invited to volunteer themselves for one to one interviewing and 15 were chosen. In selecting the women for interview women's age, farm size, identity banner usage, geographical location and whether or not they were joint owners of the farm were all taken into account.

Interviews were conducted at times and in locations chosen by the women. The women selected lived in counties Cork, Tipperary and Limerick. Three interviews took place away from the women's homes. Informed by feminist approaches to research methods and particular an ethic which attempts to address the possible inequalities in the research process, the interviews took the form of a semi – structured conversation. The women's completed questionnaires were used as a basis for the interviews; however they invariably took on their own momentum. The research process and the intention to record the interviews had been discussed when the interview appointment was being arranged, however women were invited to discuss any concerns they had. Confidentiality was assured and I willingly offered information on my own background and situation in an effort to establish an open and equal research relationship. The interviews lasted from one to three hours and in a number of cases the 'conversation' went on for a considerable time after the interview had finished. The interviews were transcribed, manually coded and critically analysed.

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<sup>3</sup> Identity banner's refers to the way that women adopt a particular way of describing 'self' eg. farmer's wife, nurse, teacher etc.

## **The Research Findings**

### 1. Official Discourses

The research of the official discourses revealed both changes and continuities in the discourses. Table 1 shows the three overarching themes which emerged from the analysis and gives a brief synopsis of their presence in the texts. The dominant discourses in FHAS texts is modernisationist, even though they contain a normative construction of the 'family farm', which preserves elements of a pre-modernisationist ideal. The project of restructuring agriculture is hidden beneath the surface (O'Sullivan, 1993). The 'modern' farm family is rational, engages in planning to ensure the future of the farm and provide an attractive work situation for the inheritor. In Foucauldian terms, the texts are engaged in the process of encouraging self - government, technologies of the self. The 'objectified' farmwife in this period is one who supports her husband in his work. She manages the domestic realm in such a way that the farm business will not be compromised.

This theme continues into the second corpus of texts whereby women's responsibility for the household is reinforced within a context in which the household has become the focus point of viability (Frawley and Phelan, 2000). Women now must take up the growing opportunities for off farm paid employment in order to sustain the household. Moreover, the dominant discourse constructs her as willing and indeed wanting to do so. Rural development strategies must include those structural features which will facilitate her doing so. There is some hints of conflict in relation to women's position, in particular the continued weak relationship to farm property ownership. However, this is glossed and indeed dismissed as outside its remit by the Department of Agriculture in the progress report produced four years later (Department of Agriculture, 2004).

Dimensions of official discourses	Farm Home Advisory Service	Report of the Advisory Committee on the Role of Women In Agriculture
<b>1. Agrarianism</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Preservationist</b></li> <li>• <b>Modernisationist</b></li> </ul>	<p>Strong links to the genealogical inheritance of agrarian ideology remains. Modernisation of agriculture sits alongside a core construct of farming as a ‘special’ or exceptional sector of the economy and Irish society.</p>	<p>Agrarianism continues to influence perspective of the agricultural sector. It is challenged by broader rural development discourses in which it is but one sector. However, the discursive divisions are not always clear-cut and official policy sometimes reassert the agrarian theme positing rural development as aiding farm survival through job creation and service provision (e.g. transport and childcare) etc. Aspect of both discourses are evident, although at times the ‘modernisationist’ discourses, so closely associated with productivist agriculture, seems less in evidence than those which seek to preserves rural areas, and the small farms as an environmental and social ‘good’.</p>
<b>2. Familism</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Patriarchal</b></li> <li>• <b>Individualism</b></li> </ul>	<p>The constructed identity of the ‘farm family’ rests on the continuing centrality of the farm to family organisation. While individualism emerges in some instances, it is framed with the confines of constructed roles and responsibilities. During the period of the FHAS, the family was a significant context for women’s sense of identity.</p>	<p>Familist discourse remains robust. The farm and its ‘survival’ is constructed as a unified goal of the family and largely used to explain new configurations of income generating activities. The constructed identities of ‘farmwomen’, ‘farmer’s wife’ etc. remains discursively available to women married to farmers, but their ‘content’ has changed. The ‘good’ wife is one who engages in paid employment to ensure farm survival. Individual self-fulfilment remains constructed as achievable through the family.</p>



<p><b>3. Gender Relation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Economic Relations</b></li> <li>• <b>Domestic Labour</b></li> <li>• <b>Women in Farming</b></li> </ul>	<p>Gender identities are developed primarily within a domestic science framework. Economic relations place women in subordinate positions. 'Partnership' is used but without legal meaning. Women 'manage' the money but men 'control' the resources. Domestic labour represents the most acute sexual division of labour; men simply do not figure in this role. 'Women in farming' is a newly emerging discourse but gender relations remain unequal, since women still have no economic power and their participation in farming is general dependent on marriage to a farmer.</p>	<p>Economic gender relations take priority in this document. While it is assumed that women remain responsible for caring roles, matters of property are prominent. Shared ownership and legal and economic rights are promoted in the text but they are caste in terms of the <i>financial</i> advantages accruing. There are no radical proposals and the tone is one of persuasion. Property matters are seen as a 'sensitive' issue' and not addressed in terms of gender equality. There is some recognition that women may wish to stay in farming, saying it should be a matter of choice. However the focus on training, transport and childcare to facilitate off farm work dominates this discourse. This is underpinned by Ministerial comments at the time, relating to women as an 'untapped resource' which needed to be brought into he workforce (Davern, Seanad Éireann, 2000 Vol. 164. 2000)</p>
<p><b>Constructive effects of the discourses</b></p>	<p>The dominant discourse is modernisationist and within this gender identity is framed within the socially prescribed roles of wife, mother and farm helper. Gender relations are characterised by the power of property ownership vested in the farmer with the wife of the farmer as dependent. However, there is a strong element of preservationist discourses which continue to set farming, the family and therefore women, apart from others. In this regard the objectification of <i>farm</i> woman, wife etc is achieved and offers itself as a subject position for women on farms</p>	<p>The 'woman farmer' identity is constructed to reinforce the work women do and its consequences for farm survival. However, as it is played out in the text, it contradicts its own definition and excludes women who have off-farm employment and who identify with other identity banners. To this end it serves to reconstruct 'women farmers' as those women who lack the skills or resources suitable for participation in the labour market and must be supported to acquire these to ensure farm viability.</p>

'Willing' individuals to behave in particular ways relies on particular circumstances that make discourses 'sayable'. The research found that agrarian and familist ideologies were used, reinforced and re-constructed by powerful interest groups, including the state. The importance of the farm to the family and the family to the farm discourse was, and remains, pervasive throughout the entire period considered in this analysis. That this rests on a set of gender relations in which women are subordinate to men in matters of farm ownership, decision-making and resources use is not confronted by the state, in spite of its stated commitments to gender equality. The concept of 'partnership' promoted by the FHAS in which women 'contributed', 'influenced' and 'supported' the real work of farming continued into the more recent RACWA (Department of Agriculture, 2000). The social status afforded the family as a 'farm family' in the discourses remain in spite of the acknowledged need for off farm earnings. Constructing women's work as part of a family strategy to remain in farming is reinforced by defining *all* women who live and / or work on farms as 'women farmers' (*ibid.*) continues to objectify women married to farmers and offer 'good wife' subjectivities which have changed very little over the decades between the discourses.

## 2. Questionnaires

The questionnaire produced rich material about women's situation. While full justice cannot be done to the findings in a report of this nature, some statistics are included to give a sense of the cohort of women who responded.

A significant figure relates to the respondents educational achievements. Fifty seven percent of respondents had completed third level education (degree and non-degree) compared to 30 per cent nationally. This reflects in women's occupational categories with 94 per cent of respondents working in socio-demographic occupational categories B, C and D (CSO).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The occupation types were categorised according to CSO socio-demographic categories. These were considered more appropriate as they are not as sensitive to grading as class categories and the survey

Undoubtedly women's motivation for engagement in the labour market is a complex matter and analysis based on survey data is necessarily tentative. That said, the survey data suggested that for the majority of women (54 per cent) their primary reasons for working off the farm was to increase household income where they perceived the farm business as lacking the capacity to do so. However, this indicated that even in those circumstances, a sizeable proportion of women were engaged in paid employment for other reasons (social contact, career development, sense of self etc.).

A core concern of this research was to develop an understanding of women's sense of themselves. Women's use of identity banners (O'Donovan, 2006) were taken as an indication of women's efforts to establish or maintain a sense of self which is more or less associated with the farm. The strength of familial discourse associated with farming suggested that adopting a non 'farm family' identity banner may be an indication of women's resistance.

Only one woman identified herself as a 'farmer' and one as a farmwoman; in the case of the first she was a joint owner of the farm and in the second case her husband was sole owner. Fourteen women categorised themselves as 'other'. These varied from those who wished to give equal prominence to two banners e.g. 'nurse and farmer's wife' to those who used two banners but gave prominence to one, e.g. 'I am a career woman and a farmer's wife and in that order'. One woman identified herself as an 'unpaid slave'. However, 79 women (57%) identified themselves in terms of their occupation and 39 (28 per cent) used the identity banner of 'farmer's wife'. Sixty seven per cent of women came from farming backgrounds but there was no significant relationship between this

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responses were generally not amenable to 'grade classifications'. In addition the socio economic categories take into account education and skill level required for the job. The categories are: B - Higher professional (including social work, accountancy, doctors, vets, university lecturers); C - Lower professional (including teaching, nursing and profession allied to medicine e.g. speech therapy); D- Non manual (including bank officials, clerical and secretarial, chefs, hairdressers etc); F- Semi-skilled (including factory operatives) and H- Own account workers (self employed).

and women's use of identity manners, neither did age correlate with usage. On the other hand women's educational achievements were significant.<sup>5</sup>

The research also found that women made significant contribution to the household and/or farm. Forty one per cent of respondents contributed over 75 per cent of their earnings which, given their job categories suggested a sizable contribution. Despite women's willingness to use their financial resources in this way, farm property remains firmly in men's hands. Only 2 per cent of farms were owned solely by women and 30 per cent were in joint names. The majority of women (57 per cent) who are not owners/joint owners said that they did not mind this situation.

Women's surprising (to me) attitude to farm property ownership contrasted with the practice of keeping their earnings firmly under their own control. Eighty per cent of respondents had their own bank accounts and 76 per cent had access to a shared account (this figure increased to 91 per cent on jointly owned farms). The notion of shared accounts however must be read with caution. It cannot be assumed that women have access to these accounts for household purposes.

If women appeared to be more or less resigned to property issues, they were most clearly dissatisfied with the time demands of farming and the impact it has on family life. Ninety five women said that marriage to a farmer restricted their choices in terms of career decisions, leisure time etc. Ninety two women availed of the opportunity to expand on their response. Overwhelmingly, women reported that they had little time to themselves and that they were dissatisfied with the balance of domestic labour. Income issues were also raised as too was their dissatisfaction with the returns from farming relative to the time investment made and the restrictions they feel it imposes on their lives.

### 3. Ethnographic Interviews

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<sup>5</sup> Mann Whitney-*U* Asymp. Sig. (2 Tailed) 0.000

The ethnographic interviews provided insights into women's sense of self and their everyday practices which challenged, resisted and reproduced structures of exploitation. The majority of women defined their sense of self independently from the farm. In the main, their subjective identity did not embrace the stereotypical 'farmer's wife' rather they preferred a 'self' associated with their occupation. Nonetheless, while they expressed independence and choice in their construction of self and the practices they associated with this, it is argued that what they 'freely' construct is a self that is remarkably compatible with the 'modern' farmer's wife found in policy discourses.

This strand of the research demonstrated the particular nature of farm households in Ireland. Living on the farm and often next to their husband's parents presented its own difficulties in a number of cases. The past constructions of 'good wives' is reinforced in some cases by the proximity of the older generation. However, in these instances participants exposed the heterogeneity of farm households, for their current difficulties were cast in relation to their own backgrounds on farms and the differences they perceived.

The majority of women interviewed contributed a considerable amount to the household /farm. In some cases women were totally responsible for household expenses and even where shared bank accounts existed it was reported that 'they never touched these'.

Without doubt, men's lack of time and their inability/unwillingness to carry out domestic tasks was an issue for the majority of interviewees and resonated with the findings from the questionnaire. None of the women engaged paid domestic help and their domestic responsibilities alongside their off-farm employment, was generally cited as a reason for not being involved in farm labour. The interviews added much deeper understanding to this issue, with three of the women (20 per cent) demonstrating such deep dissatisfaction that their marriages were under strain. Other women reported avoiding confrontation by resigning themselves to

the situation, but clearly felt that their lifestyle was less fulfilling than those of their friends and work colleagues.

Few of the women had time for outside interests. The one woman who did have time for leisure had no children but was restrained from being too public about her plans to take a holiday with friends (without her husband) because of her husband's concerns about 'what people might say'. The disciplinary effect of 'good wife' discourses was alluded to by other women too, with particular reference to neighbouring farms. In particular reference was made to women who were not working off the farm and the interviewees perception that these neighbours 'felt sorry' for their husbands having to manage the farms alone.

The research also showed caring as a site of struggle. Women used their caring responsibilities (in respect of children) to avoid farm work, clearly showing how discourses can be appropriated as a source of power. However, caring (for in-laws) was also avoided or resisted by other women. These women struggled with their resistance, feeling 'guilty' about their stance, aware of its significance in farming culture. One woman expressed it in the following terms

'And there again it's a woman's role, isn't it, the actual labour of minding the in-laws? It's like, they gave you the farm; you've come in and got this farm for nothing.'

One particularly striking aspect of women's situation was revealed by those women who had taken some time out of the labour market. Their feelings of dependency and loss of 'self' was palpable. One woman reported how she had given up smoking because she could not smoke 'someone else's money', a comment which resonated with the FHAS discourses in relation to the need for women to be prudent in matters of household spending. Another woman who had worked alongside her husband on the farm for many years returned to the labour

market. She commented on her sense of self which she described in terms of her occupation.

'I feel I've earned it, because I went to college and I got my degree and I worked for it so that is what I would always go by. That is what my profession is. [I am not] a 'farmer's wife'... you're just a fixture, something added on, whereas now I'm what I qualified and trained as. I'm a [health care professional], that's what I am'.

Some women did mention the benefits of marriage to a farmer. In particular, farmer's proximity to the home meant that as children got older they could help out with childcare until women returned home from work. Children's minor illnesses could be accommodated too without women having to take time out of the workplace. One woman commented that she would not have been able to continue to work in her job (in a demanding profession) if she was not married to someone with the same level of flexibility. Nevertheless these women all mentioned the fact that the flexibility was itself limited and that they still missed out on the benefits of shared parenting or time for themselves which they felt others enjoy at weekends.

### **Summary and Implication of Key Findings**

The research demonstrates that agrarian and familist ideologies have been used in agricultural policy discourses to achieve particular goals. The importance of the farm to the family and the family to the farm discourse was, and remains, pervasive throughout the entire period considered in this analysis. That this rests on a set of gender relations in which women are subordinate to men in matters of farm ownership, decision-making and resource use has been largely ignored by the state, in spite of its declared commitment to gender equality.

Women in paid employment off the farm demonstrated their dissatisfaction with many aspects of farming and the associated lifestyle. This expression of dissatisfaction runs counter to the dominant discourses which construct the 'farm

family' as a consensual unit. However, women have used the force of some discourses to resist and renegotiate their position within 'farm families'. This has not always been a smooth process and for some women the price of conformity or their inability to negotiate, proved too much. Their resistance involved these women moving towards a life of their own on the margins of the 'farm household'.

The findings of this research suggest that women who are in paid employment off the farm may not respond to policy measure which 'speaks' to farmers wives, farm women etc. At the same time this group of women are contributing considerably to the viability of farm households and by implication, farms. Nonetheless, they are expressing considerable dissatisfaction with lifestyle issues, in particular their husband's time commitment to the farm business. The importance of this matter in terms of lifestyle sustainability cannot be ignored. This research has made a small contribution to highlighting personal and everyday issues which may affect the reproduction of family farming into the future.

Recognition of the 'family farm' as a dynamic structure which is shaped by political and economic projects suggests that the policy makers need to look inside the black box of the 'farm family' to assess the impacts of such projects. This research has shown that the effects cannot be simply read off in terms of the apparent economic viability of the farm. Lifestyle sustainability must be included in the analysis.

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