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## "I Don't Know Where Else to Go": Pathways to Re-Exploitation After Female Sex Trafficking Survivors in Cambodia Return Home

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# “I Don’t Know Where Else to Go”: Pathways to Re-Exploitation After Female Sex Trafficking Survivors in Cambodia Return Home

## Abstract

Little is known about the experiences of human trafficking survivors over the long term. Why do some survivors experience re-victimization while others do not? Drawing from longitudinal interviews with 64 female sex trafficking survivors in Cambodia, we use qualitative comparative analysis to compare which conditions in the lives of survivors are associated with re-exploitation and which are associated with not experiencing re-exploitation. We found there are multiple factors associated with re-exploitation tied to poverty, debt, low education, and social isolation from friends, family, and the community. Poverty is a necessary condition but is not sufficient for explaining re-exploitation on its own. Conditions contributing to the absence of re-exploitation include not having debt, not sending remittances to family, being married with children, and having social support from family, friends and/or the community. We discuss distinctions between social support for survivors (e.g., from social service organizations) and broader social protections (embedded in social and cultural institutions). Each is relevant for post-trafficking services and survivor reintegration in different ways.

## Keywords

Cambodia, sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, qualitative comparative analysis, violence

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## “I DON’T KNOW WHERE ELSE TO GO”: PATHWAYS TO RE-EXPLOITATION AFTER FEMALE SEX TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS IN CAMBODIA RETURN HOME

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### ABSTRACT

Little is known about the experiences of human trafficking survivors over the long term. Why do some survivors experience re-victimization while others do not? Drawing from longitudinal interviews with 64 female sex trafficking survivors in Cambodia, we use qualitative comparative analysis to compare which conditions in the lives of survivors are associated with re-exploitation and which are associated with not experiencing re-exploitation. We found there are multiple factors associated with re-exploitation tied to poverty, debt, low education, and social isolation from friends, family, and the community. Poverty is a necessary condition but is not sufficient for explaining re-exploitation on its own. Conditions contributing to the absence of re-exploitation include not having debt, not sending remittances to family, being married with children, and having social support from family, friends and/or the community. We discuss distinctions between social support for survivors (e.g., from social service organizations) and broader social protections (embedded in social and cultural institutions). Each is relevant for post-trafficking services and survivor reintegration in different ways.

### KEYWORDS

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**L**ITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT THE EXPERIENCES of sex trafficking survivors over the long term. What unanticipated challenges do trafficked persons face in the months and years after they receive assistance? What are their successes? Why do some survivors avoid re-victimization while others end up back in violent or exploitative circumstances? It is seemingly presumed—at least by media reports and popular accounts of trafficking—that once victims leave exploitative circumstances and receive services, that the sex or labor trafficking “episode” is over (Brennan, 2005). This view is short-sighted and fails to consider how a survivor’s vulnerability factors might persist (or worsen) after they return home. To comprehensively understand the most effective ways to prevent and assist trafficked persons, we must not only consider what

happened during victims' initial victimization but also survivors' broader life histories and their ongoing vulnerabilities (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010).

Drawing from longitudinal data with former victims of sexual exploitation in Cambodia, we used qualitative comparative analysis (Ragin, 2008, 2014) to trace factors in the lives of sex trafficking survivors and compare factors associated with re-exploitation to those factors associated with *not* experiencing re-exploitation. In other words, what do survivors who *do* experience re-exploitation have in common with one another in comparison to those who *don't* experience re-exploitation?

We compared the experiences of 64 female sex trafficking survivors in Cambodia based on over 800 interviews, phone logs, and field notes collected over a period of eight years. We scored each participant for risk and protective factors thought to be associated with sexual exploitation, including poverty, level of education, community support, and experiences with violence, as well as demographic variables such as marital and parental status to see how these factors compare across survivors who do and don't experience re-exploitation. We found that many survivors experienced re-exploitation after receiving services and returning home, but not for the reasons often assumed. Moreover, according to our analysis, factors contributing to re-exploitation worked in *combination* with one another rather than on their own.

## BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on trafficking typically aim to estimate its prevalence, scrutinize its definition, or analyze the experience of trafficking itself (Limoncelli, 2009; Zhang, 2009). The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, adopted by the United Nations (U.N.) in 2000, defines human trafficking as being forced or coerced into exploitative sex and/or labor. Though this study draws from the experiences of individuals initially trafficked for sexual exploitation, many also experienced other forms of labor exploitation before, during and/or after their sex trafficking experience, blurring the lines between these distinctions. Debates surrounding definitions of *trafficking* and *exploitation* are conceptually, politically, and historically complex (see Gallagher, 2010). This study uses legal definitions of sexual and labor exploitation to the greatest extent possible.

Research on what life is like for trafficking survivors after they receive services is very limited (but see Brennan & Plambech, 2018; Brunovskis & Surtees, 2012; Surtees, 2013). Even less is dedicated to examining *re-trafficking* or *re-exploitation* (Jobe, 2010), whether for sex, labor, or a combination of both. Granted, conducting longitudinal research with trafficking survivors after they've received services and returned home has numerous challenges. For instance, survivors may want to move on with their lives without participating in research, or they may migrate again, making them difficult to find (Brennan, 2014; Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010). Studies on life after trafficking generally have small sample sizes and are not longitudinal. Most find that, even after receiving assistance, survivors of sex or labor trafficking continue to face numerous hardships.

Survivors of sex trafficking in Azerbaijan, for example, struggled to find jobs and permanent housing (McCarthy, 2018). Those in Eastern Europe had socio-economic and health challenges in addition to facing severe hardships in their relationships with family members (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2012). Even when entitled to government assistance, those trafficked into the United States for forced labor faced similar social and economic challenges as the mainstream migrant population but with the added stigma and trauma of being a trafficking survivor (Brennan, 2014). Labor

trafficking victims in Southeast Asia, whether assisted or not, struggled to meet their own physical, social, and emotional needs long after returning home, regardless of national or international policy standards intended to help them do otherwise (Surtees, 2013).

Information on *re*-trafficking is generally anecdotal, and existing discussions are primarily focused on cases involving repeat cross-border migration and/or deportation (Jobe, 2010). One of few existing empirical studies, based on 79 cases of women re-trafficked in Eastern Europe that we documented in the International Organization of Migration's (IOM) Human Trafficking Database, found that those who were initially trafficked for sex under the age of 18 were more vulnerable to re-trafficking in adult life (Jobe, 2010). However, this study was limited to standardized survey data collected at one point in time, immediately after the trafficking episode, and does not capture survivors' in-depth perspectives or the ebbs and flows of their longer-term experiences.

## SEX TRAFFICKING IN CAMBODIA AND THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION

Studies that measure and compare human trafficking numbers are rife with methodological challenges (Savona & Stefanizzi, 2007). Nonetheless, Cambodia and the surrounding Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) are often highlighted as places where human trafficking and sexual exploitation are especially rampant, primarily due to extensive flows of migration, slow economic development, and forced labor (see Molland, 2012; UNODC, 2014). The Greater Mekong Subregion is located along the Mekong River basin in Southeast Asia, covering Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Yunnan Province of China. Though each country in the GMS is unique, they have strong historical, geopolitical, and cultural commonalities.

Media reports about children for sale in Cambodia have been criticized for sensationalizing the problem rather than recognizing its complexities, contributing to oversimplified perceptions about sex trafficking causes and trends across the country (Keo, Bouhours, Broadhurst, & Bouhours, 2014; Soderlund, 2005). Cambodia is among the poorest countries in the world, ranked 144 out of 189 countries on the United Nations (U.N.) 2019 Human Development Index. After decades of war and political instability, more than half of the population is either illiterate and/or never completed primary school, and lack of formal education is common, particularly among women (National Institute of Statistics, 2009). It was one of the first countries to receive massive international aid to curb sex trafficking after passage of the U.N. Trafficking Protocol in 2000. With the availability of funding came a tremendous influx of shelters and programs for trafficking victims, particularly young women, and girls trafficked for sex (Brammer & Smith-Brake, 2013).

Similar to what is recounted in counter-trafficking policy and campaigns, many donors and assistance programs in Cambodia and the GMS broadly assume that the key factors making women and children vulnerable to trafficking and sexual exploitation are poverty, limited education, and lack of awareness about the problem (see Derks, Henke, & Vanna, 2006; Molland, 2012). However, many practitioners working with sex trafficking victims in Cambodia and the region recognize risk factors that are more diverse and complex, including socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors such as filial piety and inequalities tied to gender, race, ethnicity and/or citizenship status (Brammer & Smith-Brake, 2013; Long, 2004; Perry & McEwing, 2013; Taylor, 2005). Additional factors influencing trafficking that are specific to Cambodia include the historical context, particularly when the Khmer Rouge intentionally destroyed

and separated families during the Cambodian genocide (which is thought to have an ongoing impact on family dynamics today), widespread government corruption, and the weak rule of law (Brown, 2007; Keo et al., 2014; Reimer, Langelier, Sophea, & Montha, 2007; U.S. Department of State, 2020).

Empirical studies to systematically determine which risk factors are the *most important* (and in which configurations) for driving exploitation and trafficking in Cambodia, the GMS, and elsewhere are practically non-existent (Limoncelli, 2009). Even less is known about vulnerability factors for *re*-trafficking and/or *re*-exploitation in the lives of survivors. Indeed, discussions about re-trafficking are typically limited to concerns about re-trafficking or deportation only across borders (rather than within borders), and data is typically anecdotal rather than systematic (Jobe, 2010). In Cambodia, assistance programs aim to assist trafficking victims return safely to the community and avoid re-victimization, providing services such as counseling, education, and job training (Bearup, 2016; Reimer et al., 2007). However, practical knowledge about the difficulties survivors face after reintegration is rarely scrutinized, and assistance programs typically limit their follow-up to 12 months or less (Miles & Miles, 2010).

By failing to consider the longer-term experiences of survivors after the initial trafficking episode is over and what factors contribute to re-exploitation, policymakers and practitioners cannot adequately analyze the long-term effectiveness of existing counter-trafficking programs and policies. This article utilizes unique, in-depth, longitudinal interview data with sex trafficking survivors to examine the complex causes of sexual (re-)exploitation and trafficking. The cases we examine are specific to the experiences of sex trafficking survivors in Cambodia and the GMS. However, the risk and protective factors we measure – poverty, debt, low education, social isolation, and physical/emotional abuse – are also hypothesized to cause sex and/or other forms of trafficking more broadly, beyond Asia (e.g., see UNODC, 2008).

## METHODOLOGY

We drew from over 800 in-depth interviews with 64 sex trafficking survivors in Cambodia. These were collected multiple times a year with each study participant between 2010-2018 as part of Chab Dai's Butterfly Project, designed to assess trafficking survivor reintegration over a period of ten years. All interviews were conducted by Cambodian nationals and co-authors of this article, Lin and Chantha, in the respondents' native language. The interview guide inquired about multiple domains of each participant's life, including finances, family, peer and romantic relationships, physical health, emotional wellbeing, experiences with the justice system, education, and employment. Except for phone and informal conversations described in interviewers' fieldnotes, most interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed and translated into English.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDY SAMPLE

To select the most relevant subsample for this study, we excluded male participants, as well as female participants who were still living in an anti-trafficking shelter during the last year that data was collected. We excluded male participants because there were comparatively few males in the overall study, and our early analysis made it clear that gender heavily impacts post-trafficking experiences, requiring separate analysis. Females in the larger study that were still living in shelters toward the end of our target time period, in 2017, were excluded because we wanted to assess what respondents' lives were like once they returned home, not while living in a shelter. Six



cases of reintegrated female survivors from the larger data set were also dropped due to not having a sufficient number of interviews after reintegration to be comparable to others or due to lack of sufficient data about our specific research questions. This left 64 female participants, or “cases,” in our sub-sample for which we analyzed 802 interviews, 312 fieldnotes, and 92 phone logs (taken when respondents contacted the research team by phone), collected between 2010-2018.

Cases included in the study were primarily trafficked for sexual exploitation within Cambodia’s borders. Most are Cambodian nationals and identify as ethnic Khmer (Cambodian), though some lacked documents and self-identify as ethnic Vietnamese<sup>1</sup>. All of the victims were sexually exploited as part of their initial trafficking experience. Some of them also experienced labor exploitation. Their ages at first interview ranged between 7 and 25 years old, with an average age of 17 (see Table 1). Most were minors at their first interview and were, therefore, minors during their initial trafficking experience (n = 34; 53%). Though trafficking impacts people of all ages, the young age of most participants is not surprising for the context of Cambodia or for this sample, which is primarily made up of assisted victims. Because so much media attention has been given to child victims of sex trafficking in the country, and international and domestic law automatically grants trafficking victim status to anyone who is sexually exploited or prostituted under age 18, this makes young victims more easily identified and the target population for many assistance programs (see Brammer & Smith-Brake, 2013; Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010).

There are likely differences between the experiences of unidentified, identified, unassisted, and assisted trafficking victims (see Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010), so the research team recruited as diverse a sample as possible. Still, because identified and assisted victims are more accessible, this study only includes identified victims (those formally identified by law enforcement as sex trafficking victims) and has more assisted than unassisted participants. A significant majority of the sample received some form of post-trafficking assistance (n = 54; 84%) from one or more of the 11 assistance programs represented in the larger study. This means they received some range of social and/or economic services (e.g., shelter, legal assistance, education, counseling, skills training). Granted, respondents experienced different types and levels of support from their assistance programs. Which services or programs proved more successful than others is an important question but is outside the scope of this article.

Most participants lived in a shelter program for at least four months (n=48; 75%). Others were in a shelter program for less than four months, participated in a non-shelter community program (e.g., foster care, job training, n=6), or declined services all together (n=10). Those who declined services were identified as trafficking victims under domestic and international legal definitions, but either did not see themselves as victims or opted out of receiving any services (an option only made available to persons over age 18).

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<sup>1</sup> The population of approximately 500,000 ethnic Vietnamese people living in Cambodia are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. An estimated 90% are stateless, born within Cambodia’s borders but denied citizenship, birth certificates and/or identity cards (see Minority Rights Group International, 2017).

TABLE 1. *Descriptive Characteristics of Study Participants*

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
<i>Female</i>	64	100 %
Age at First Interview		
7-12	3	5 %
13-17	31	48 %
18-25	30	47 %
Type of Assistance Program		
<i>Shelter &gt; 4 mos.</i>	48	75 %
<i>Community</i>	6	9 %
<i>Declined</i>	10	16 %
Number of Years Interviewed in Community		
7	10	16 %
6	17	27 %
5	5	8 %
4	7	11 %
3	16	25 %
2	8	12 %
1	1	1 %

Sex trafficking survivors represent a vulnerable, hard-to-reach population who are sought out and sometimes manipulated or misused by political agendas, sensational media stories, and public-facing campaigns. This leads to methodological challenges for many counter-trafficking studies (Brennan, 2005; DoCarmo, 2019; Gerassi, Edmond, & Nichols, 2016). We are cognizant that it can be difficult for survivors of trafficking to trust others. Many participants in the study told us they did not even speak about their trafficking experiences with friends or family. With this in mind, the research team recruited and enrolled study participants very cautiously, with permission from Cambodia's national research ethics committee overseen by the Ministry of Health and in close cooperation with social service and referral agencies.

Participation was completely voluntary, and respondents could refuse to answer any question or leave the study at any time, returning later if they wished to do so. Though the research team did not pay respondents for their participation directly, they covered costs related to participation (e.g., transportation, meals during interviews), and direct referrals were provided to respondents who needed economic, social, or health-related assistance. To ensure that the respondents did not feel obligated to speak positively about their assistance programs or worry that what they said



would be shared with their social workers or counselors, privacy and confidentiality were taken very seriously. Assistance programs were not allowed access to any data from the study.

## ANALYSIS

We use fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to systematically analyze what factors reintegrated survivors who experience re-exploitation have in common and what those survivors who *don't* experience re-exploitation have in common. Developed by Ragin (2008, 2014), fsQCA is based on Boolean algebra or set theory and tests whether conditions or combinations of conditions (e.g., poverty, low education) are necessary or sufficient for the presence of a specific outcome (e.g., re-exploitation). It is considered one of few methods well suited for the analysis of causal complexity (Fiss, 2011).

The strength of fsQCA is that it bridges the assets of in-depth qualitative familiarity with those of Boolean quantitative logic. Qualitative thematic analysis of interviews on its own is useful for understanding individual, contextual case information. However, this approach does not systematically measure patterns across cases. Quantitative analysis, on the other hand, focuses almost exclusively on how variables “compete” for importance, usually by comparing average scores. Thus, it typically overlooks case complexity, the possibility that variables may work together rather than on their own, and/or the possibility of multiple pathways to one outcome. FsQCA is informed by in-depth qualitative familiarity with each case but uses quantitative logic to systematically compare cases to one another. While an in-depth explanation of fsQCA is beyond the purview of this article, we briefly explain the central features of the method as is pertinent to how we analyzed the data for this article (for more thorough explanations, see Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2008, 2014).

Each participant, including all of their interview data between 2010-2018, represents a single “case” for comparative analysis, for a total of 64 cases. First, we developed a scheme for calibrating each case’s data into consistent, commensurate scores for comparison and recorded these in a detailed codebook. For each year that participants lived in the community, we scored their degree of membership in four “at-risk” category sets (economic poverty, social support, education, violence). We also scored each participant for the outcome of interest (re-exploitation) and several demographic variables (age, marital status, parental status). We use the term *re-exploitation* instead of the term *re-trafficking* because in no situation was a participant in the study identified by courts or local authorities as “re-trafficked” under the law. Nor did we see analytic value in differentiating between the two. In accordance with the study’s ethical guidelines, participants who interviewers suspected were experiencing re-exploitation or re-trafficking were always offered direct referrals for assistance.

In practical terms, this means we assigned each case with a membership score for each risk factor and outcome, with scores ranging between 0 (fully out of the set) and 1 (fully in the set), with few to no cases scoring 0.5 (the cross-over point, signifying no membership at all). For example, if a participant experienced severe poverty, they were given a score of 1.0 in the “severe poverty” set. If they did not experience severe poverty, they received a score of 0.0 (see Table 2 for more detail). The research team scored each participant for all factors during each year they were living in the community. The findings here reflect scores at one point in time during 2018. An analysis incorporating temporal or *trajectory-based* QCA (Pagliarin & Gerrits, 2020), which incorporates time and sequence of events into the analysis, is in process.

To ensure consistent coding, we randomly selected ten cases from the sample that each of us coded individually. We compared scores, adding specificity to our calibration and coding schemes where needed. Then we scored the remaining cases, cross-checking our scores and collectively reviewing cases where there was ambiguity or disagreement. Every case was coded, reviewed, and cross-checked by all three authors.

## DESCRIPTION OF CONDITION AND OUTCOME VARIABLES

The authors worked collaboratively to hypothesize what factors might be contributing to re-exploitation among those in our sample. To determine what factors to measure, the authors drew on their experiences in the field, reviewing reports and academic studies that estimated what contributes to trafficking and exploitation in Cambodia and elsewhere (e.g., Derks et al., 2006; UNODC, 2008, 2014). Then we conducted an initial thematic coding of transcripts and field notes, looking for patterns of potential factors, developing hypotheses, and discussing how to operationalize our variables. After reading all transcripts and field notes for the participants in the sample, we scored each respondent for demographic information, including marital and parental status, and for variables that we hypothesized contribute to re-exploitation (risk factors, which we call “conditions”) across nine categories: *poverty*, *debt*, *sending remittances*, *family support*, *community/peer support*, *NGO support*, *level of education*, recent experiences with *physical violence* (e.g., physical abuse by a parent) and recent experiences with *emotional violence* (e.g., verbal abuse from a boyfriend). For more detail, see Table 2.

We coded two outcome variables of interest – *sexual exploitation* and *labor exploitation*. After much discussion and careful consideration, we defined these variables as the degree to which participants experienced re-exploitation, after re-integration, using legal definitions to the greatest extent possible. Specifically, re-exploitation is defined as financially motivated sexual activity or work for which the participant: 1) was under 18 (for sexual activity), 2) had limited control over their work or was taken advantage of by those in more powerful positions, and/or 3) expressed distress about their ability to leave their work situation. Rather than make our own assessments, the intention of the larger study was to better understand respondents’ experiences and views. Therefore, we primarily relied on respondents’ own assessments of whether they felt exploited and/or whether they could leave their situation. We hypothesized that a score of 1.0 in each of our risk factor variables (e.g., poverty, debt, remittances, low family support) would be associated with receiving a score of 1.0 for sex or labor re-exploitation.

After conducting initial analyses and cross-checking the results, we chose to combine two of our variables into macro-variables, combining scores from multiple conditions or outcomes into one. This is a common and accepted practice when using fsQCA when it’s clear that condition variables operate in conjunction with one another and do not result in different, statistically significant findings when analyzed on their own (see Ragin, 2008). We created macro-conditions for *lack of social supports* (a combination of poor family support, poor peer support, and poor NGO support) and a macro-outcome for *re-exploitation* (a combination of sexual exploitation and labor exploitation).

It is important to note that the scores used for analysis are based on the life situation of participants *during the last year they were interviewed*. Survivors’ lives are constantly changing, and respondents’ perspectives about past experiences often

differ over time. Therefore, our findings only represent survivors' experiences and perspectives at one point in time.

**TABLE 2. Description of Condition and Outcome Variables**

	Variable	Notation*	Fuzzy Set Scoring
Demographics	<i>Single</i>	SINGLE	0.0 = Married, 0.2 = Lives w/partner, 0.75 = Casual partner, 0.9 = Divorced/Widowed, 1.0 = Single
	<i>Child(ren)</i>	CHILD	0.0 = No children, 0.25 = Has child, but does not support or live with them; 0.75 = Has child, supports or lives with part-time; 1.0 = Has child living at home
Economic	<i>Poverty</i>	POV	0.0 = Steady income, shelter, food, able to support self, occasional leisure items. 0.33 = Some regular income, has shelter, food, basics but is restricted/tight, no money for leisure items; 0.66 = Irregular income, minimal access to food/shelter, pawns items to cover basic expenses; 1.0 = Significant poverty, little or no access to food/shelter, on street, or moves to live with others
	<i>Debt</i>	DEBT	0.0 = No debts; 0.33 = Little debt, does not impact basic expenses; 0.5 (not in or out) = No debt because does not qualify to borrow; 0.66 = Some debt, own or obligated to pay for others, sometimes affects ability to pay basic expenses; 1.0 = Significant debts, own or others, significantly affects ability to pay basic expenses.
	<i>Remittances</i>	REMIT	0.0 = Rarely sends; 0.25 = Occasionally, out of obligation but family does not demand it; 0.75 = Sends often out of obligation, sometimes affects ability to pay own basic expenses; 1.0 = Sends regularly out of obligation, family perhaps demands it, significantly affects own expenses.
Lack of Social Supports	<i>Family</i>	ISOLATE*	0.0 = Maintains positive, reciprocal relations w/partners, family, few negative relationships reported; 0.25 = Mostly positive, sometimes feels pressure from family but if does not comply, they back off; 0.75 = Negative pressures from partner, family or in-laws much of the time, most relationships are non-reciprocal, has few positive family relationships to count on regularly; 1.0 = Immense negative pressure from partner, family or in-laws, leading to isolation, loneliness, high stress, has very few or no positive family relationships, most are troubled, non-reciprocal

	<i>Community</i>		<p>0.0 = Maintains positive relationships in community, has friends, experiences little to no harassment;</p> <p>0.25 = Mostly positive relationships, some harassment from community;</p> <p>0.75 = Little to no connection with neighborhood or community, no friends;</p> <p>1.0 = Mostly negative relationships in community, experiences harassment, few friends.</p>
	<i>Prog/NGO</i>		<p>0.0 = Maintains positive, balanced relationship with NGOs/programs, takes advantage, feels supported;</p> <p>0.25 = Services are available and respondent is aware or interested but hasn't taken advantage;</p> <p>0.75 = Services only sporadically available or NGO encourages unbalanced relationship, participant feels unsupported or uncertain where to get help;</p> <p>1.0 = No connection to NGO or social services, previous program stopped communication referrals, has reached out for help but was denied or had a negative experience</p> <p><u>Macro-condition</u>: Variable created by averaging scores from family, community and NGO variables</p>
Education	<i>Education</i>	EDU	<p>0.0 = Grade 12+, high-level/professional skills training, or has job requiring high level skill;</p> <p>0.25 = Grade 9+, or high-level/professional skills training but trouble accessing skilled job market;</p> <p>0.75 = Below Grade 9, some formal skills training but no longer enrolled, quit before completion, or training has not proven to help get a skilled job;</p> <p>1.0 = No formal education past Grade 5, no vocational/skills training, no skilled job prospects</p>
Violence	<i>Physical</i>	VIOLP	<p>0.0 = No experiences of physical violence in past 6 months;</p> <p>0.6 = Experienced 1-2 occurrences of physical violence with limited injury in past 6 months;</p> <p>0.8 = Experienced physical violence 3+ times, or physical violence leading to major injury (e.g., hospitalization, broken bones, concussion) in past 6 months;</p> <p>1.0 = Experienced regular physical violence (weekly, monthly) or 1+ occasions leading to major injury</p>
	<i>Emotional</i>	VIOLE	<p>0.0 = No experiences of emotional violence (i.e., verbal abuse, gaslighting, neglect) in past 6 months;</p> <p>0.6 = Experienced 1-2 occurrences of emotional violence in past 6 months;</p> <p>0.8 = Experienced occurrences of emotional violence 3+ times in past 6 months;</p> <p>1.0 = Experienced regular (weekly, monthly) emotional violence in past 6 months</p>
Outcome	<i>Sex</i>	EXP*	0.0 = No sexual exploitation; 0.4 = Involved in sexual

Exploitation	relationships with monetary or material benefits, but no explicit sexual exploitation (e.g., financially supported by husband overseas); 0.75 = Sexual exploitation; maintains some control over money/gifts but relies on income, intimacy and cannot easily leave or walk away (e.g., professional girlfriend); 1.0 = Sexual exploitation; feels she cannot leave, gives money to third party and relies on them for basic needs, or engages in street prostitution for survival
Labor	0.0 = No labor exploitation; 0.75 = For minors only, engaged in severe form of child labor as defined by U.N. (i.e., interferes with health, education, development); 1.0 = In job cannot leave due to debt, force or coercion by employer or third party
	<u>Macro-condition:</u> Variable created by taking highest score of the sex or labor variable.

*\*Note:* CAPITAL letters signify the presence of a condition (>0.5) in a pathway whereas lower case letters signify its absence (<0.5). The variables for ISOLATE and EXP are macro-conditions, scored as a combination of the variables in that category.

Co-author, DoCarmo, used fsQCA's software package (Ragin & Davey, 2016) to complete our fsQCA analysis, based on the logics of Boolean algebra. This software organizes scores for conditions and outcomes into a truth table, which breaks down all possible combinations of conditions, counts how many cases in the empirical data match each combination, and how many of these cases have a similar outcome. Rather than measuring the "net effect" of these conditions as quantitative regression models would do, fsQCA maintains the diversity of each participant's situation by examining how these factors *combine* in comparison to other cases with the same outcome (as opposed to moving toward a mean or placing variables in competition with one another).

Through logical deduction, the software algorithm minimizes the truth table using counter-factual analysis, resulting in simplified "pathways" of conditions that lead to the same outcome across the sample. Because fsQCA does not assume symmetry in causation (i.e., the mirror opposite of what causes re-exploitation is what causes *no* re-exploitation), we first tested risk factor conditions for those contributing to the *presence* of re-exploitation (those leading to re-exploitation) and then for the *absence* of re-exploitation (protective factors that contribute to *no* exploitation). After completing fsQCA analysis we went back to our interview case data to look at the specifics of case narratives and how these aligned with our results.

## FINDINGS

Of the 64 cases in our sample, 12 respondents (19%) received outcome scores over 0.5 for sexual exploitation (signifying they experienced re-exploitation) and 5 (8%) received outcome scores over 0.5 for labor exploitation. When the outcomes were combined into one variable (i.e., the macro-outcome variable for re-exploitation), 15 (23%) received a score of over 0.5 (two cases received a score over 0.5 for both). Table 3 provides a summary of all participant scores.

**TABLE 3. Summary of Condition and Outcome Scores**

Condition/Outcome Variable		Frequency of Cases (n=65)	
		Condition Absent (<0.5)	Condition Present (>0.5)
Demographics	<i>Single</i>	26	38 (59 %)
	<i>Child(ren)</i>	32	32 (50 %)
Economic	<i>Poverty</i>	22	42 (66 %)
	<i>Debt*</i>	34	24 (38 %)
	<i>Remittances</i>	19	45 (70%)
Lack of Social Supports	<i>Family</i>	34	30 (47 %)
	<i>Community</i>	37	27 (42%)
	<i>Prog/NGO</i>	26	38 (59 %)
	Macro-Variable	32	32 (50 %)
Education	<i>Education</i>	13	51 (80 %)
Violence	<i>Physical</i>	52	12 (19 %)
	<i>Emotional</i>	25	39 (61 %)
Exploitation	<i>Sex</i>	52	12 (19 %)
	<i>Labor</i>	59	5 (8 %)
	Macro-Variable	49	15 (23 %)

\*Note: Six cases were given a “non-score” of 0.5 for debt (neither absent nor present), see Table 2 for details.

Though the number of respondents who experienced re-exploitation is by no means the majority of the sample, that 23% experienced re-exploitation is important considering that most participants (80%) received considerable post-trafficking services after being recognized as sex trafficking victims the first time; services that were intended to help them recover and move on after returning home. Among those in the sample who experienced re-exploitation, only three (20%) had opted out of programming and declined assistance. Those who did receive assistance and experienced re-exploitation were not from the same programs, as a range of assistance programs were represented.

Of note is the finding that 100% of participants in the study who experienced re-exploitation had scores over 0.5 for extreme poverty (POV). This means that poverty is a *necessary* condition for re-exploitation and is always present in the lives of survivors experiencing re-exploitation. However, we did not find poverty to be a *sufficient* variable, so it does not explain re-exploitation *on its own*. It must be combined with other conditions. This is because although those who experience re-exploitation all experience poverty, and there are many other respondents in the sample who

received high scores for POV but did *not* experience re-exploitation. Thus, re-exploitation is a subset of poverty, but poverty is not a subset of re-exploitation.

## PATHWAYS TO RE-EXPLOITATION

Table 4 shows the results of the fsQCA analysis for pathways to experiencing re-exploitation. We only accepted causal pathways with a minimum consistency score of 0.8 or higher and a solution coverage score of at least 0.7. *Consistency* scores indicate how often each pathway is a subset of the *outcome*. For example, if the pathway includes poverty, a consistency score of 0.8 signifies that poverty shows up in 80% of all the pathways to re-exploitation. *Coverage scores* indicate the proportion of cases with that *pathway* that result in the outcome. Thus, a coverage score of 0.7 signifies that 70% of the cases with poverty result in re-exploitation.

**TABLE 4. Reduced (Intermediate) Pathways to Re-Exploitation**

Solution Pathway	Coverage	Consistency
child*EDU*ISOLATE*VIOLP*VIOLE	0.336	0.832
POV* (necessary condition)		
OR		
REMIT*EDU*ISOLATE*VIOLP*VIOLE	0.309	0.907
OR		
DEBT*REMIT*child*EDU*VIOLP*VIOLE	0.204	1.000
Solution Coverage: 0.643		
Solution Consistency: 0.832		

*Note:* The notation \* signifies the operator *AND*. See Table 2 for full descriptions of each notation and variable. In short, POV = extreme poverty; child = no children; EDU = low education; ISOLATE = little to no social support; VIOLP = recent physical violence; VIOLE = recent emotional violence; REMIT = regularly sends remittances; DEBT = has personal or family debt.

The solutions displayed are *intermediate*, meaning they include only the conditions that survive fsQCA's counterfactual analysis (see Ragin 2008). These are based on theoretical knowledge about how each condition is associated with the outcome (e.g., high poverty scores will be present with re-exploitation, rather than the opposite), which is added to the algorithm.

Our analysis shows that: 1) conditions contributing to re-exploitation are only combinatorial pathways (no condition works on its own), and 2) multiple pathways lead to re-exploitation rather than only one. The first pathway, for example, denotes that high poverty (POV) in combination with no child (child), low education (EDU), low social support (ISOLATE), and recent experiences with physical and emotional violence (VIOLP, VIOLE) contribute to re-exploitation. None of these conditions cause re-exploitation on their own, and this pathway is only one possibility out of three. The second pathway also includes high poverty (POV), in combination with low education (EDU), low social support (ISOLATE), and violence (VIOLP, VIOLE) but rather than lack of a child includes sending significant remittances (REMIT) out of obligation to family members. Meanwhile, the third pathway drops low social support but adds high debt (DEBT).

The solution consistency score for this model means that these represent pathways to re-exploitation 83% of the time (0.832). The coverage score means that 64%



(0.634) of the cases with these pathways result in re-exploitation (0.643). Because fsQCA results do not connote symmetry, the opposite of these pathways (e.g., no poverty, high education, high social support, etc.) does *not* necessarily designate non-exploitation, which I describe further below.

This set of pathways is relatively consistent with our qualitative interview data with respect to the circumstances of those who end up in re-exploitation. Those with low education, limited economic resources, and limited social support, for example, said they had trouble coping with everyday life. In these situations, respondents expressed feeling hopeless and alone, with nowhere to go and no one to trust. Many did not have a steady place to live, moving from place to place, incurring debts they would eventually have to pay later. This usually leads to situations where they return to exploitative circumstances because they feel they have no choice and report feeling trapped, without other options.

For example, the second solution pathway (POV\*REMIT\*EDU\*ISOLATE\*VIOLP\*VIOLE) is exemplified in Chantrea's story. At age 15, Chantrea (a pseudonym) was recruited by a labor broker to migrate to Malaysia, where she worked for two years, first as a domestic worker and then in a plastic factory. It was strenuous work; she worked long hours and felt very isolated. The recruitment agency held on to her passport, but she managed to escape and spent all of her earnings arranging to be smuggled back to Cambodia. The job in Malaysia was supposed to contribute to her family's debts to a micro-finance institution from whom they borrowed money to buy the construction materials needed for a new house. When the employment in Malaysia concluded, Chantrea felt pressure to find another job. Upon arriving back in Cambodia, her aunt arranged work for her in what she thought was a restaurant but ended up being a KTV (karaoke bar). There she met another girl who recruited her to another KTV where sex was sold. This KTV was raided by police, and Chantrea ended up residing in a shelter for sex trafficking victims.

After a few months at the shelter, Chantrea and a few other residents ran away. The research team was able to find and meet with her about a year later. At this point, she was 19 years old and had very limited formal education (less than fifth grade). She was living and working at a KTV with some of the girls with whom she ran away from the shelter. She said she had run away because her friends were leaving and she didn't want to be left alone. She also said she needed to earn money for her family and assistance programs only wanted to teach them English or crafting (she went back and forth about her decision to leave; years later, she told us she had regrets). In addition to her family's micro-loan debts, Chantrea's brother was now in jail, and they needed money to pay legal fines. Over the next several years, Chantrea continued to work at many different KTVs, often moving to new ones after being evicted, or experiencing physical or emotional violence from other girls, bosses, or customers. Because she made a commission when customers at the bar bought more beer, she started drinking a lot and experimented with recreational drugs. She disclosed that drinking and using drugs helped her escape her problems sometimes but also made her feel sick, and she was worried about her health.

At first, Chantrea informed us that she did not engage in sex at the KTV. However, several years into the study, she revealed this wasn't true and commented that whether she engaged in sex depended on the KTV where she was living and/or working. At some KTVs, she only flirted with customers, making most of her money through commissions on beer and alcohol. Other KTVs were more forceful, and she was harassed or judged if she didn't engage in sex with customers. At some places, she had sex with customers on the premises and was only allowed to take days off if she was

menstruating. At these, she could usually only go outside if she got permission to run errands during the day. At others she engaged in sex with customers off-premises, but still had to hand over a substantial part of her earnings to the owner. The owners usually paid fees (i.e., bribes) to local police to leave them alone, but at one place, she had to pay fees to local police officers out of her own earnings. If she didn't pay these, the officers would harass her. She told us that owners never forbid her from leaving their KTV outright but tried to manipulate her to stay, for example, by telling her they considered her family. At one place, the owner sent their children and grandchildren to cry at her feet, telling them they loved her and pleading with her not to leave.

Chantrea disclosed that she did not like to have sex with customers and was often mistreated. But she had nowhere else to go or live and felt she must send money to her family. "I do not like this job. I do it because I don't know where else to go, and this is the only place I know." One day she plans to pay off her family's debts, leave the KTV and open her own grocery shop. When asked who in her life she felt she could trust, she said she trusted no one.

### PATHWAYS TO ABSENCE OF RE-EXPLOITATION

In addition to analyzing the risk factors and conditions contributing to re-exploitation, we analyzed those that contribute to the *absence* of re-exploitation (i.e., protective factors). As stated previously, fsQCA does not assume causation symmetry for the presence and/or absence of an outcome. Table 5 presents the results of fsQCA analysis for this second analysis. For this model, we analyze the pathways contributing to outcome scores for re-exploitation *below* 0.5 (no re-exploitation) rather than above 0.5 (re-exploitation is present).

The resulting pathways for this model are analytically distinct from the first model in three ways: 1) there are several more pathways of protective factors available for the absence of re-exploitation than the presence of re-exploitation, 2) the pathways are more parsimonious (with less conditions required in each pathway) and 3) there are no conditions found to be necessary or sufficient on their own (such as poverty was for re-exploitation). The solution also has higher consistency and coverage scores, so it explains more diversity among participants than the model for pathways resulting in re-exploitation.

**TABLE 5. Reduced (Intermediate) Pathways to Absence of Re-Exploitation**

Solution Pathway	Coverage	Consistency
debt <i>OR</i>	0.636	0.902
CHILD*isolate <i>OR</i>	0.286	0.942
remit*CHILD <i>OR</i>	0.349	0.961
single*CHILD <i>OR</i>	0.224	0.907
SINGLE*pov*isolate	0.255	1.000
Solution Coverage: 0.848		
Solution Consistency: 0.911		

*Note:* The notation \* signifies the operator AND. See Table 2 for full descriptions of each notation and variable. In short, debt = absence of debt; CHILD = has children; isolate = has social support; remit = does not regularly send remittances; single = not single/married; SINGLE = single/not married; pov = low poverty, has steady income, access to food, shelter.

Those with limited debts and remittances, in combination with strong social supports from friends, family members, or other community supports, are overwhelmingly represented in the set of cases with no exploitation. Protective factors contributing to not being re-exploited include: 1) not having debt (debt), 2) having a child, but with adequate social support (CHILD\*isolate), 3) having a child, but not sending remittances to other members of the family (remit\*CHILD), 4) being married with a child (single\*CHILD), or 5) being a single person with adequate financial and social support (SINGLE\*pov\*isolate). Not having debt comes out particularly strong, with a consistency rate of 0.9, meaning that 90% of respondents not experiencing re-exploitation do not have debt, making it a close (but not quite) necessary condition.

Once again, these solutions are fairly consistent with what the participants in the study described about their circumstances. Several of these pathways, for instance, are exemplified in Lida's story, whose case was scored as: *CHILD\*single\*pov\*debt\*remit\*isolate\*EDU\*violp\*viole*. After living many years in a shelter for sexually exploited minors, Lida transitioned to a community program designed to provide survivors of trafficking with job training and work experience. While there, she earned enough money to rent a room with a roommate. During this time, she got engaged to a man with a modest (but stable) job and became pregnant. During her pregnancy, she faced several health problems but was able to access health care services through a local NGO and eventually gave birth to a healthy child. After having her baby, she and her fiancé moved in with his parents (a common practice in Cambodia). They made enough money to provide for themselves but not enough to afford their own home.

Though Lida did not experience re-exploitation during the course of our study, this is not to imply that her life was easy. She was very stressed about balancing domestic responsibilities, taking care of her baby, and completing her training program. The vocational training program was very challenging for her. She could not read and feared that once the training program was over, she would not be able to find a good

enough job with her new skills. She and her husband made enough money for themselves and were able to hold steady jobs, but she dreamed of having their own home. She sometimes had to borrow from her mother-in-law to pay for items like baby formula. This was not something she wanted to do because she feared it put stress on the family's power dynamics. Still, her husband appeared to provide her with emotional support; her own family did not demand that she send them money, and for the most part, she got along with her in-laws. She described her mother-in-law as being a positive force in her life. Lida did not have many friends, but her mother-in-law helped her and gave her advice. She told us that this life was better than her previous one. She planned to give her baby a better life than she had and hoped to one day have her own business.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Drawing from 802 interviews collected over eight years with 64 survivors of sexual exploitation in Cambodia, we use fsQCA (Ragin 2008, 2014) to examine why some female sex trafficking survivors experience re-exploitation while others do not. Of the 64 cases in our sample, 23% experienced sex or labor re-exploitation after returning home. FsQCA analysis demonstrated that the pathways to re-exploitation include high poverty as a necessary (but not sufficient) risk factor. Three combinatorial pathways to re-exploitation that include poverty include not having a child, sending regular remittances to family, having considerable debts, low education, low social support, physical violence, and emotional violence. When analyzing for protective factors contributing to the *absence* of re-exploitation, combinatorial pathways include not having debt, not sending remittances, being married with children, having social support (from family, peers, or NGOs), and/or being single but with low poverty and strong social supports.

Our data is limited to what our participants told us, according to their own perspectives about their current situations. Other study limitations include the sample being limited to sex trafficking survivors in Cambodia, only having the capacity to trace *re-exploitation* (rather than initial forms of exploitation) and the sample containing primarily those who received assistance after their initial trafficking experience (rather than unidentified victims and those who have been identified but did not receive assistance).

These findings partially resonate with claims of policymakers, donors, and campaigns that vulnerabilities to trafficking and exploitation are tied to extreme poverty and limited education. However, they do not support that exploitation is fully rooted in these causes as is often stated or imagined. We see that poverty and limited education do not “explain” (re-)exploitation (and potentially trafficking) on their own. They are present among survivors (e.g., poverty is a necessary condition). Still, there are many respondents in our study who faced these problems but were *not* re-exploited (poverty is not *sufficient*). Indeed, poverty and lack of formal education are widespread issues across much of Cambodian society.

Instead, findings from fsQCA analysis suggest that many causal factors for re-exploitation are social in nature, including whether the respondent is married or has children, whether they have social support from family, friends, or community organizations, and whether they have experienced interpersonal emotional and/or physical violence. This does not suggest that other factors, not present in the pathways, do not matter. In Chantrea's case, we see that factors such as debt and sending remittances

can contribute to one's isolation or poverty. Rather, the pathways show what factors are common across *most* cases (82%) of re-exploitation.

Notably missing from the results about protective factors (for the *absence* of re-exploitation) is having a high level of education, which did not show up in any of the resulting pathways. Education is a major focus of Cambodia's assistance programs, which assert that skills training and education are essential for preventing exploitation after reintegration (see DoCarmo, 2012; Miles & Miles, 2010; Reimer et al., 2007). In partial support of this theory, we found that low education contributes to re-exploitation in the first model as a risk factor. However, having a good level of education is missing from the second model, suggesting that *low* education is a *risk* factor for re-exploitation, but *high* education is *not* a contributing *protective* factor. Why? A possible explanation is that low education contributes to re-exploitation because it limits income and/or job prospects, but that the education survivors received at school or in assistance programs is either *not enough* or is *not the right type* of education required to prevent re-exploitation (i.e., training or education that results in a skilled job).

Perhaps the most surprising finding is the strong association between re-exploitation and the demographic variables for marriage and having a child. We initially hypothesized that parenthood would be a risk, *contributing* to re-exploitation rather than protecting it because of the associated financial burdens. However, our findings suggest the opposite; that *not* having a child is a risk factor contributing to re-exploitation in one pathway. Having a child is a protective factor, contributing to exploitation's absence. Moreover, we did not hypothesize that marriage would be a risk or protective factor in either model but find that being *married with a child* or being *single with social support and a steady income* are both protective factors for the absence of re-exploitation.

After returning to interviews and case narratives to further explore this finding, we conclude this does not mean marriage or parenthood are always positive in and of themselves. Most survivors struggle to take care of their children, and marriage does not necessarily eliminate violence, interpersonal or economic hardships. In fact, a number of the marriage relationships among the participants were troubled, respondents often have tense relationships with their in-laws, and some marriages were outright abusive (reflected in high scores for emotional violence among many married respondents). Rather, we suspect that this finding suggests there are broad *social protections* that being married or being a mother provides for women in Cambodian society.

This raises questions about distinctions between social and economic *support* for survivors (from NGOs, family members, etc.) and broader social *protections* (culturally embedded in social institutions) and their relevance for prevention, victim services, and survivor reintegration. For example, many counter-trafficking programs in Cambodia aim to protect and support young trafficking survivors by keeping them in a shelter, often for months or years. This is thought to meet the immediate needs of the survivor by separating them from perpetrators in the community, providing them with ongoing access to services, and preparing them to reintegrate safely eventually (DoCarmo, 2012; Miles & Miles, 2010; also see Surtees, 2008). Reintegration efforts by these programs focus on ensuring the survivor's physical safety in the community, combined with providing economic and/or education supports to prevent further trafficking or victimization in the future (Bearup, 2016; Reimer et al., 2007).

Given our findings, these types of support for reintegration are certainly relevant (e.g., they give the survivor somewhere to go, may help prevent debt). However, they are seemingly *not enough* for survivors who lack access to sustained social protections such as marriage (typically arranged by family members in Cambodian society) in the longer term. Indeed, Brown's (2007) study finds that the owners and others who work at sites of sexual exploitation in Cambodia (i.e., brothels, karaoke bars, sex establishments) often serve as a "substitute family" for young women who previously experienced abuse, suggesting this is the type of social, family, connection that some victims and survivors are searching for. Moreover, as we saw in Chantrea's story, the owners of sex establishments use substitute family connections to control and manipulate.

The family has long been the foundation of Khmer social structure. Family and kinship play a major role in social, political, and business interactions across Cambodian society (Ebihara & Adem, 2012). Unmarried, adult respondents in the study who lacked strong ties to parents or other family members repeatedly told the research team they wanted to get married and/or were looking for a husband. They expressed not wanting to be alone, and for young women who were experiencing chaos, violence and/or severe exploitation in their lives, the prospect of getting married in the future seemed to provide a sense of finality; that their experience with sexual exploitation would be over and they would have somewhere to go. Even if these beliefs are based on family pressures or romantic notions of marriage and having children (at least to some degree), our findings support the fact that having access to and belonging to a family – whether through birth, marriage, or another avenue – in and of itself, can be a protective factor. Those who experienced re-exploitation generally lacked regular access to a nuclear family, whereas those who did *not* experience re-exploitation were more likely to have strong family (or family-like) connections.

There is growing research and concern about the extent to which staying in a shelter for an extended period to help overcome trauma and distress, especially for children, makes pivotal family relationships more vulnerable (e.g., see Brunovskis & Surtees, 2012; DoCarmo, 2012; Ministry of Social Affairs Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, 2011; Surtees, 2008), and additional research is warranted. Further research and analysis should also consider how risk factors and protective factors differ for male survivors of trafficking and survivors of labor trafficking.

The results of this study contribute to gaps in existing research about the experiences of trafficking survivors after they return home, as well as gaps in knowledge about factors contributing to re-exploitation and factors protecting against it. Findings can be used by policymakers and practitioners to consider how counter-trafficking policies and programs can be improved to better address combinations of risk factors rather than singular ones. This includes acknowledging that broad social inequalities and lack of ongoing social supports after services have been provided can contribute to re-victimization.

It also raises the possibility that policies and programs can try and leverage broad social protections embedded in society to strengthen survivors' protections. In the Cambodian context, this might mean investing more time and energy in helping survivors strengthen family bonds, or in the absence of family connections, helping survivors establish family-like bonds with other members of the community. We do not claim that our findings are generalizable to all survivors of sex trafficking but suggest that they mark the beginning of further research that needs to be conducted with respect to how combinations of risk and protective factors contribute to survivors' long-term wellbeing, whether in Cambodia or elsewhere.

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