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Socio-Cultural Determinants of Women's Homelessness: A Study of Dar-ul-Aman, Multan

By Mahwish Rasheed¹, Tayyaba Batool Tahir² and Zahid Zulfiqar³

Abstract

Home is an integral element of the Pakistani family system, and the idea of home is deeply embedded in Pakistani women's consciousness. The prime objective of this study is to explore the socio-cultural factors responsible for women's homelessness. This study highlights various determinants that lead women to leave their homes. The issue of women fleeing from their homes is a matter of disregard in Pakistan's culture, such an action is considered as an issue of family's self-image, respect, and honour. In the present study, Marxist and feminist lenses have been used to indicate women's secondary status that is responsible for their homelessness. Interviews of twenty-five women were conducted in Government Dar-ul-Aman⁴ Multan, Pakistan. Purposive sampling was used to select the respondents. The age range of informants was 14 to 55. All married, unmarried and single women, widows and divorcees were part of the sample. Analysis was conducted following the assortment of information from the field thematic analysis. This study uncovers the variables liable for women's displacement like gender-based violence, which is an intense issue globally and has a significant role in the secondary status of women in Pakistan. Some other important factors like poor financial status, forced marriages, absence of education, parents' discriminatory behaviour and various kinds of violence affect women physically, socially and emotionally.

Keywords: Homelessness, *Dar-ul-Aman*, Discrimination, Violence, Socio-cultural Factors, women's homelessness, Pakistan

Introduction

Homelessness is a multifarious and intricate issue. Pakistan has a population of 200 million and it is the 6th densely populated country worldwide. About 20 million people are poverty-stricken in Pakistan (Khan, 2016). Tragically, women have a high ratio of homelessness because in a strong patriarchal system violence and gender-based discrimination force them to flee from their homes. Women become impoverished because of various interconnected social issues, including forced marriages, exploitation, sexual assault, abusive behaviour at home, poverty, mental illness, gender discrimination and so forth. As demonstrated by World Health Organization (WHO) data from 2013, one of each three women has been beaten, raped, or abused in some other way most likely by someone she knows (Gender-based brutality, 2016). Gender-based violence is a violation of basic rights and harms women's lives by affecting their access to basic rights to life, health, education, security, and well-being. This study investigates multiple factors that force women to get away from their homes and they seek refuge in *Dar-ul-*

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⁴ Dar-ul-Aman is an asylum that provides refuge, protection and security to homeless women.

Aman. Although a *Dar-ul-Aman* is called a shelter home, this paper considers living in *Dar-ul-Aman* as 'homeless'.

'Home' is regarded as the space where women make decisions, as generally it is said in Pakistan that, *Aurat hi ghar bananti hai*⁵. The issue of a woman leaving her home is seen as a matter of family's respect. Subsequently, the chances to take this issue seriously and report it directly are very low and the family tries its best to hide the event and solve this matter in seclusion. Because Pakistan is a male oriented society, male members of the family make decisions and it is expected from a woman to obey her family's decisions. For example, if a woman wants to marry a man of her own choice, then it is seen as resistance against the harsh familial and social rules particularly in rustic regions of Pakistan. Therefore, when a woman escapes from home, male individuals from the family (father, mate, or kinfolk) generally think of it as an unimaginable shame regarding their family name. Sometimes, families catch and kill the fleeing women to re-establish their professed honour (Jibeen, 2014). Illiteracy and low levels of education are the basic reasons behind such mindsets and criminal acts (Aslam, Raza, & Ijaz, 2015).

Socio-Cultural Context

Pakistan has a typical male-centric structure where it is normal to control women through rigid customs in favour of males, family, kinship organisation, mindset and a strong belief linking family honour to women's behaviour, as honour indicates a women's chastity, maintenance of virginity and feminine purity. This view is exemplified by the practice of *purdah*⁶ which is related to covering and veiling of women and the impression of *chardevari*⁷. In rural and tribal areas of Pakistan, it is a common thinking that women should follow *Purdah* and should live within the four walls of the house (*chardevari*) to preserve the family's honour and to avoid infidelity. In the patrilineal and patrilocal pattern of Pakistan, a woman is recognised through the relationship with men that shifts from her father to her husband throughout her life. It is a customary saying that "Women can just leave their houses in two cases; once to be married, and once to be buried" (Critelli, 2012, p. 441). Marriage is not considered as a romantic and emotional connection between couples, but it is seen as an association between the two families (Abraham, 2000). The patriarchal system is deeply rooted in rural areas where local values and beliefs govern national law. Women from the upper and middle classes have more awareness about their rights and have better educational and employment opportunities than the women from the lower class (Critelli, 2012). Divorce is considered a shameful act and a "failure", which, like choice marriage, results in loss of honour for the whole family. So, women who are suffering such situations and want to be divorced or seek a love marriage usually face threats to their lives from their family and relatives.

Shelters offer protection to homeless women. The government has established many shelters in different areas of Pakistan. Shelters provide refuge and counselling to female victims of violence and injustice; moreover, they help to empower them to experience financial independence. The Punjab Provincial Assembly affirmed "The Punjab Protection of Violence against Women Act" in February 2016 despite resistance from Islamic parties (Amnesty

⁵*Aurat hi gharbanantihai*, is a famous saying in Urdu language and it means "woman is a homemaker". She is considered as the queen of her home and deals with all matters relevant to her home.

⁶*Purdah* is a traditional veiling system in Muslim societies.

⁷*Chardevari* is a term from Urdu language. It means four walls of home. This concept refers to confining women to the four walls of the house and to keep them out of the sight of men.

International Report Pakistan, 2016/2017). According to Article 25 of Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, each citizen has equal rights and access to security. Gender discrimination is illegal. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2010) asserts that security will be provided to women and children. However, these laws are not efficiently implemented by law enforcement agencies and most women are vulnerable and facing violence in Pakistan (Niazi, 2012).

The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees privileges and rights for people, but still Pakistan stands among those nations that have low literacy rates among women. According to the statistics, the literacy rate among women was 46.49% in 2019 and only 25% women with a university degree are working in various fields besides agriculture (79%) (Neill, 2022). Women cannot make any decision about their lives and have limited access to education and career opportunities (Jibeen, 2014). Rigid social standards and male-centric structure induce women to flee from their homes.

Methodology

The government shelter home (*Dar-ul-Aman*) Multan was selected as the locale for the current study. *Dar-ul-Aman* works under the Social Welfare Department of the Punjab Government and is situated at Ameer Abad, Rajwana Road, Multan, Pakistan. *Dar-ul-Aman* Multan was established in 1971, and the purpose for building it was to provide security, institutional care, education, legal aid, psychological counselling, vocational training and earning opportunities to destitute and impoverished women. In all thirty-six districts of Punjab, *Dar-ul-Amans* have been established. The staff of *Dar-ul-Aman* consisted of 16 members. The *Dar-ul-Aman* had a female superintendent in charge of efficiently managing the *Dar-ul-Aman's* activities.

Table 1: Hierarchy of Dar-ul-Aman

Sr. #	Designation	Pay Scale	Number of posts
01	Superintendent	BPS ⁸ :17	01
02	Psychologist	BPS:17	01
03	Lady Doctor	BPS:17	01
04	Assistant	BPS:16	01
05	Senior Clerk	BPS:14	01
06	Computer Operator	BPS:12	01
07	Warden	BPS:11	01
08	Supervisor	BPS:09	01
09	Religious Instructor	BPS:08	01
10	Handicraft Teacher	BPS:08	02
11	Driver	BPS:05	01
12	Naib Qasid	BPS:02	02
13	Sweeper	BPS:02	01
15	Chowkidar	BPS:01	01

Dar-ul-Aman fulfils basic needs of its inmates and provides free boarding and lodging

⁸ BPS stands for the basic pay scale structure and is a widely used pay scale system for government departments and organisations in Pakistan.

facilities. Displaced women are referred by court to *Dar-ul-Aman*; 63 women were residing in *Dar-ul-Aman* at the time of the study, although it only has the capacity to accommodate 50. All 63 women were from the lower and middle class. *Dar-ul-Aman* has a board of ten legal advisors who provide legal support to women in *Dar-ul-Aman*. Purposive sampling was used, and 25 women were selected as the respondents.

Table 2: Age Distribution of *Dar-ul-Aman*'s Inmates

Sr. #	Age Category	Frequency	Percentage
01	14-20	8	32 %
02	21-30	10	40 %
03	31-40	3	12 %
04	41-50	2	8 %
05	50 Above	2	8 %
Total		25	100%

All married, unmarried, divorced women and widows were part of the sample and they participated in the interviews.

Table 2: Marital Status of *Dar-ul-Aman*'s Inmates

Sr. #	Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage
01	Single	9	30.15 %
02	Married	11	33.33 %
03	Divorced	3	17.46 %
04	Widow	2	19.04 %
Total		25	100%

Their education levels ranged from uneducated to bachelor's degree among the respondents. Majority of women were illiterate.

Table 3: Literacy Rate of *Dar-ul-Aman*'s Inmates

Sr. #	Category	Frequency	Percentage
01	Uneducated	9	36 %
02	Primary ⁹	6	24 %
03	Middle	5	20 %
04	Matric	3	12 %
05	F.A.	1	4 %
06	B.A.	1	4 %
Total		25	100 %

The researchers carried out in-depth and semi-structured interviews to collect accurate data. An interview guide was prepared and the first part of it was about basic information (age, address, number of family members, education), while the second part consisted of questions about the

⁹ In Pakistan, the education system is divided into six levels, preschool (3 to 5 years), Primary (1st to 5th standard), Middle (6th to 8th standard), High/Matric (9th and 10th standard), Intermediate/F.A (11th and 12th standard) and University level programs for undergraduate and graduate studies.

homelessness. The purpose of the research was explained to the informants and consent was sought before interviews. *Dar-ul-Aman's* staff coordinated the interviews. The participants were motivated to explain their life experiences in their own words concentrating on important incidents. Probing and questioning were posed in appropriate places. Audio-recorded interviews were conducted. Key notes were taken during interviews. The findings were divided into multiple themes that highlight the important reasons for women's homelessness.

Ethical Considerations

The local language (Urdu) was used during interviews to collect data in a comfortable environment. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were used for each participant. We conducted analysis of the women's lived experiences, presented below.

Results and Discussion

Participants highlighted multiple factors about homelessness. Right from their birth females face discriminatory situations such as being considered less valuable than male children. It is expected that young girls will participate in housework at an early age; discrimination and gender bias continues through puberty and girls' overall development and growth is affected because of the lack of formal education and freedom. Women also suffer abuse in marital relationships (Psychosocial Care for Women in Shelter Homes, 2011). Reasons for women's homelessness such as violence (physical, sexual, psychological), financial issues and emotional reasons (love affairs, eloping from home) are interconnected to each other.

Thematic analysis identified three main themes pertaining to socio-cultural factors causing women's homelessness: violence; the economic factor including financial vulnerability and economic abuse (control over partner's money and assets); emotional factors /love affairs.

Table 4: Thematic Analysis

Factors	Definition of Term	Frequency	Ratio
Violence	Torture or hurt someone by using force.	11	44%
Physical Violence		5	
Psychological Violence		3	
Sexual Violence		3	
Economic Factors	The factors related to financial issues.	9	36%
Financial Vulnerability		6	
Economic Abuse		3	
Emotional Factors / Love Affairs	Factors related to choice marriage or love marriage.	5	20%
Total		25	100

The analysis involved elements associated with young women's lives which compelled women to run away from their homes. These elements were interlinked with their lives and

created a frustrating environment that affected women's stability and mental peace. It is clear from the above analysis that 44% were victims of violence and 36% women suffered from poverty and financial issues and escaped from their homes while 20% of women left their homes because of emotional involvement with someone or love affairs.

Violence in Multiple Forms

Violence against women is a key factor causing homelessness. It is a universal issue, and it sometimes creates helpless situations for women. Results demonstrate that women were abused by in-laws, spouse, parents, and relatives etc. The participants' accounts indicate that they suffered extreme violence in different forms. Eleven participants mentioned that violence became the reason for them to leave their homes. Different kinds of violence experienced by participants are mentioned as; physical violence; psychological violence; sexual violence. Women respondents shared their traumatic experiences. A woman respondent Asia (35 years) shared:

I fell in love with a man, and we got married. He was my cousin. Everything was perfect – until one day he slapped me on a minor issue. He isolated me from my family and monitored my every move. I tried to commit suicide but survived. One day, he tried to hit me in the head with the hammer, but I ran away from home and that was the last day of my life with that man. I never want to see him again.

Physical Violence

Physical violence was one of the biggest reasons motivating women to leave home. Women went through extreme violence by spouse, in-laws or parents. Violence involved hitting in anger, hair-pulling, choking, arm-twisting, punching, stifling, stabbing, pushing, burning, striking, coercive feeding, kicking, beating, biting, slapping and other harmful situations like leaving a person in unforgiving climate, hitting with weapon, tying with some object and hitting etc. Extreme violence occurred due to the acceptability of violence as social norm, women's subordination, having no child or no male child, dowry, involvement of husband in criminal activities or drug addiction etc. Financial instability allowed husbands to beat their wives in anger. Five participants affirmed that they left their homes because of violence. A young sixteen-year-old girl Rimsha, recounted her painful experience:

My husband was into drugs, and he used to beat me on a regular basis for unknown reasons. One night, he tied me with a table and tortured me badly while he was drunk and not in senses. He nailed my hands and feet. I was crying for help, but nobody came. I was badly injured and frightened. After that horrible night I decided to leave home.

In Pakistani it's a common assumption that 'once a woman gets married, she will live or die in her home (her husband's home)'. Divorce is considered a shameful act and women who demand divorce are considered *bey sharam*¹⁰ and *bey ghairat*¹¹ and parents do not allow their

¹⁰*Bey sharamis* a word from Urdu Language and its English translation is shameless. The one who has no shame.

¹¹*Bey ghairatis* a word from Urdu origin. In English it can be referred to as dishonourable. The one who has lost the honour.

daughters to take such dishonourable and shameful steps. This concept is rooted in South Asian culture especially India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In Pakistan, arranged marriages are common. Parents choose partners for their children, especially their daughters. The consent from a girl is not considered necessary. In such marriages usually understanding between a husband and a wife doesn't develop and consequently misunderstandings and clashes develop. In most cases the parents do not support, but they also blame their daughters for their unhappy lives. The parents suggest their daughters compromise with their husbands in any situation.

Aurat Paon ki Jooti Hoti Hai, or A woman is equal to a man's footwear

Paon ki joti (Footwear) is a concept that shows the secondary status of women. Males are decisionmakers and heads of the families while women are treated as subordinates who have less or no contribution to decisions about the family and their own lives. Men take it as their privilege to control and rule over women. Such circumstances create imbalance in family and society (Dube, 2011). Although, women from the upper-class enjoy freedoms and participate in decision making but in lower- and lower-middle class families, women do not have such rights. Interviews unveiled the fact that women tolerated the misconduct of their in-laws and husbands while husbands considered it their right to torture their wives. Asma shared:

My husband not only used to beat me but made me feel inferior in front of other people. I was seven months pregnant when he badly tortured me, and I lost my child. I can never forget that day and I want divorce from him.

Psychological Violence

Psychological violence is as harmful as physical violence. Many female participants stated that they left their homes because of continuous psychological torture and suffocating environment. Psychological violence involved using offensive language, psychological stress, damaging women's self-respect, humiliation, threats to hurt or kill them, insults, false allegations, denying women's rights and calling them names such as *e bad kirdaraurat*¹², *khusra*¹³. They made threats of divorce and ignored their needs. Spouses, in-laws, parents, and relatives were responsible for such violence. Psychological violence resulted in trauma, depression and post-traumatic stress among victims. Three participants left their homes after suffering harm and stress. Zainab narrated:

I was a maid by profession and my husband was jobless. My husband believed that I was having an affair with someone. He used to beat me daily and called me a bad character woman. I decided to not to spend my life with that man anymore and I left my home.

Women from the lower middle class and the lower-class face lack of trust from their families especially if they do outdoor work. They are considered *awaara*¹⁴ if they come home late because of their workloads.

Sexual Violence

¹²*Bad kirdaraurat* is a term in Urdu, used for bad character women.

¹³*Khusra* refers to the 3rd gender in Urdu Language.

¹⁴*Awaara* is a term in Urdu, used for vagabond or loose character person.

Three participants disclosed that sexual violence was the main reason which forced them to leave their homes. The participants' experiences revealed that they suffered multiple forms of sexual violence including sexual contact without consent (for example stroking, seizing, kissing), assault, forcing them to perform unwanted sexual acts, hurting sensitive body parts, marital rape, use of weapons or any object during sex attacking genitalia, performing sexual activities when they were not ready or felt fear etc. Participants shared that they were still suffering from sleep disorders, stress, trauma, and flashbacks of those worst memories of the past and anxiety as long-term aftereffects of those cruel forms of violence. Haseena shared her painful experience:

After having enough alcohol, my husband used to beat me on a regular basis and forced me to have intercourse. Haseena said, he threatened me that he would marry some other woman if I didn't obey him or fulfil his sexual needs. This fear forced me to obey him like a slave. All that was like a scary dream for me, and I was unable to sleep at night.

The Pakistan Penal Code, Section 375, defines rape and marital rape as, "a sexual act performed by man with a woman without her consent". Until 2006, the definition had another part that clarified that rape is only for a woman "who is not his wife". The law did not consider marital rape as a crime before 2006 (Khan, 2019). In most cases, the woman's parents forced her to remain silent and suggested that she should obey her husband because after all he is her *majazikhuda*¹⁵. Marital rape is not considered an issue in Pakistani society, and if a woman tries to discuss it with her family, they might even chuckle at her that it seems unpleasant and inhuman (Bilal, 2016). Talking about marital rape is regarded as taboo in Pakistani society. The respondents' experiences uncovered that sexual abuse had long term effects on women, and they felt frightened to begin another relationship with some other man because of their experience. Although the law recognizes marital rape, it is still not recognized among people as such, the women victims have lack of support from their parents about this matter. Such situations force women to leave their homes.

Economic Factors

Two important issues relevant to material and financial assets were observed were financial vulnerability and economic abuse.

Financial Vulnerability

Financial vulnerability was one of the reasons for women leaving their homes. Six participants revealed that economic instability and poverty left women no choice but to leave their homes. Involvement of husbands in drugs and alcohol, forcing women to work and using their income in drugs; husbands beating their wives if they seek money for their needs etc., are reasons women explained for their homelessness. Many women staying in *Dar-ul-Aman* wanted to divorce their husbands who were drug addicts and did not do any kind of work to meet the basic needs of their families. Some participants disclosed that they were having extra marital affairs to fulfil their daily needs because their husbands were not able to even provide them with food.

¹⁵*Majazikhuda* is a Metaphorical term from Urdu language that resembles man to Lord or God. This term shows the powerful status and rights of a husband over his wife.

Marriages are considered as a contract of the exchange of material assets between two families. A woman is considered a costly 'object'. Men who suffer poverty consider their women's sexuality as a priceless resource, a costly thing requesting a high price to deal with joblessness and destitution. Tahira narrated:

When I was just 10 years old my parents passed away in a road accident. My grandfather was a poor old man and was not able to fulfil my needs. When I was sixteen, my grandfather sold me in return [for] cash (one Lac). My 'so called' husband never considered me as a wife. He treated me as a servant. I was just a thing purchased in exchange of money. And I was there just to serve my husband and just to face his inhuman behaviour.

Financial Liability

A common belief in Pakistan, is that a male child will take responsibility for his parents in their old age. Daughters are considered a liability/burden (Hussain, Fikree, & Berendes, 2011). A very common view is that daughters just 'take', and they just do not 'give' anything. Parents invest money in their daughter's education and growth and after marriage they leave their parents. Parents are bound to give a dowry to their daughter, and they save money for this purpose. Like sons, daughters do not earn for their family. Although in middle- and upper-class young women are highly qualified and work in different fields, circumstances are terrible in lower-class because of absence of education, knowledge and lack of economic independence. Most women respondents in *Dar-ul-Aman* shared that they didn't have the right to speak up about their share in their parents' property. One of the respondents said that in her family it was a common saying that *Siyaaniyan dhiyaan ni mangniyan* (wise daughters do not demand).

Economic Abuse

Control over assets including property, land, shares, jewellery etc is defined as economic abuse (Adams, Sullivan, Greeson, & Bybee, 2008). Women who experienced economic abuse lived in an environment of fear and instability in their homes. The married women disclosed that they could not sell their dowry items without permission from their spouse, father-in-law and mother-in-law. Three participants expressed that their life partners misled them by taking their thumb impressions on property papers without their consent. When they found out the truth, their spouses tossed them out of their homes. Shah Bano (age 55) shared:

My husband dumped me and took my thumb impression on my property papers and expelled me from my home. I have been living in *Dar-ul-Aman* for three years. It's in women's destiny to endure embarrassment and agony. My old age has been destroyed.

Emotional Factors/Love Affairs

One of the greatest reasons for women escaping from home is relationships and the longing to get married to the men they like/love. When parents refuse the marriage proposal of their daughters' boyfriends, they typically react by running away from their homes. In extreme cases, a married woman may decide to leave her husband and escape with her beau. Five respondents showed a similar justification for leaving their homes. Saima shared that,

I escaped from my home because my folks married me off with my cousin forcefully while I was already married to someone I love. Mujahid and I had a court marriage, but my parents were not prepared to acknowledge my marriage and they required me to remarry. According to my religion, I know it's a sin for a woman to remarry while having a first marriage also. I left my home because I want to live with my first husband and don't want to be in any unwanted relationship.

These three themes explain the reasons for women's homelessness: First, violence was the most significant reason that affected women's lives and they left their homes when they found no support from their families. Violence affected the mental peace of women and traumatised them. Second, financial vulnerability and control over women's assets forced women to leave their homes. Women fled from different situations e.g., being sold for money and forceful transfer of women's assets to husbands and in-laws. Third, love affairs forced women to leave home because they wanted to marry the person they loved. In such cases, lack of support from their families was the biggest factor in leaving home.

Recommendations

Pakistani society has a specific mindset about the women who leave their homes or run away from their homes. The literature and research findings demonstrate the well-known belief that the honour of the family is connected to women. If a woman runs away from her home, the whole family suffers disgrace. No one tries to understand the reasons that forced women to flee from their homes. Illiteracy, conservative culture, gender discrimination, lack of awareness about women's rights that are permitted in Islam and in Pakistani law are key reasons for the vulnerable position of women in Pakistan leading to homelessness. Research findings show that shelter homes have an important role in providing shelter and security to displaced women. Unfortunately, shelter homes lack some basic facilities and funding—this was also true with *Dar-ul-Aman*, Multan. We make the following recommendations for improvement:

- Create awareness about women's rights and implement community-level interventions.
- Strict laws regarding violence against women should be introduced and implemented.
- The government should figure out how to reduce gender inequality and violence against women. The Constitution of Pakistan must ensure equality of rights without gender bias.
- *Dar-ul-Aman* provides rehabilitation services, but these services should be improved to empower destitute women.
- Women can only stay for a short period in *Dar-ul-Amans*. The women do not have income to live independently. Policies should be introduced for women to manage their living once they leave *Dar-ul-Aman*.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to an understanding of how patriarchy operates in lower and lower-middle class, especially rural homes in Pakistan. It demonstrates how violence in multiple forms is endemic to patriarchy, how powerful it is, and how despite the Constitution, cultural beliefs and structural inequities sustained by violence persevere, rendering this aspect of patriarchy a form of fascism. Leaving home was not an easy option for the women. The fear of losing their children and jeopardising their future was important, though that prevented many

women from leaving their homes. When their parents didn't support them, and they saw the non-steady and discouraging attitudes of their families, they chose to leave. 'Home', a place of comfort and protection, was considered a place of fear and restlessness. The home environment that was created by family members, particularly men, was humiliating, torturous and unbearable. In Pakistan, women bear the burden of family honour. By choosing to leave home, the women challenged their family's honour, which is also a challenge to the patriarchy with severe repercussions for the women. Due to the violent and torturous behavior of their families, women burned their bridges, and decided not to go back to their homes. *Dar-ul-Aman* is a liminal space for women, which gives them protection and temporary relief from violence. Unfortunately, the concept of 'home' no longer existed for the women respondents of this study and the chances of having a new home were limited. Family honour once gone, cannot be regained in Pakistani culture. Therefore, home was a Paradise that was lost for many residents of *Dar-ul-Aman*.

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