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Inuit Women Reach a Deadlock in the Canadian Political Arena: A Phenomenon Grounded in the Iglu¹

Carole Cancel

Introduction

Inuit political representatives constitute an integral part of the Canadian political life. Long negotiations in various regions of Arctic Canada, such as Nunavik (Northern Quebec), Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and Nunatsiavut (Labrador), have allowed them to be active at all levels of politics.² Even though some Inuit women have managed to make their way into the public sphere, their numbers remain very low in comparison to those of men. The Legislative Assembly of Nunavut, for example, currently has only two women out of a total of 19 members. Still, many Inuit women are involved in local and community councils and associations.³

Since the 1980s, a few Canadian Inuit women have publicly denounced the barriers they face in their attempt to be part of the political arena (Flaherty 1994a, 1994b; Goo-Doyle 1989; *Nunatsiaq News* Nov. 9, 2001). Interestingly, while the male-dominated Inuit political elite officially espouses an open position towards female participation in politics, these declarations of openness have been contradicted in practice by disrespectful behaviours that some of these women have pointed out.⁴ While various reports released in Canada have revealed that most Canadian women face analogous obstacles, such as the difficulties in combining family and political life as well as paternalistic attitudes from male counterparts (Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada 1970; Purdon 2004), there are two reports which deal specifically with the case of Inuit women in politics (Archibald and Crnkovich 1999; Pauktuutit 1991). The case of Inuit women is unique and deserves to be analyzed.

Recent research conducted about the role of Inuit women in the public sphere (Finland Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2002) often consists of chronological observation of Inuit women's potential access to political power from pre-contact social organization to the initiation of the Canadian political model (Minor 2002). In a complementary approach to that research, we will focus here on recent political events in Nunavut.⁵ Our work analyzes and compares the tensions between the inclusive rhetoric within the political arena towards women,

and the difficulties women actually face. In order to find out how much tension there is, we conducted a field work project, interviewing Inuit people close to the public sphere. Field work took place in Ottawa and Montreal in the spring of 2005. At first, we only intended to gather data on the working conditions of these women. As the interviews progressed, however, we realized that the recollections of the interviewees who had been participants in the campaign meeting for the 1997 referendum on gender parity in Nunavut were a valuable source of information.⁶ We also collected memories concerning the reactions of the public to the campaign, which provided us with salient insights into the real condition of Inuit women's participation in politics.

The results of the interviews we conducted provided us with insights into the difficulties previous research has shown to be faced by Inuit women who want to be involved in politics. These difficulties include characteristics of the cultural background of the Inuit, the consequences of the introduction of the Inuit to the Canadian political model of governance (Minor 2002), and the influence of some religious beliefs. Rather unexpectedly, statements collected during field work allowed us to glimpse a sort underground aspect to the phenomenon which was not evident at first. Several responses we received to our questions urged us to focus on the campaign for the 1997 gender parity referendum in Nunavut, a crucial episode in the history of Canada. A closer look at the various attitudes and reactions by the Inuit of Nunavut to this event reveal the key role played by the idea of the traditional Inuit household. Further research on the cultural concept of the couple (the basic entity of Inuit identity) is instrumental in understanding the difficulties faced by Inuit women in politics today.

Resistance in the Political Sphere

Inuit women, as individuals or a group have decried the negative attitudes and behaviours they have experienced in the political arena, such as in the various statements made by Martha Flaherty, President of Pauktuutit⁷ in the early 1990s (Flaherty 1994a, 1994b; Pauktuutit 1991). The “code of conduct for leaders” proposed by Pauktuutit in 1994 was an attempt to make the actors on the political stage more accountable and respectful toward one another and the individuals they represent. At the time, Flaherty (1994b) said:

Inuit leaders must work on behalf of their people in a way which reflects this tradition of respect and concern. This means putting the good of the people before personal gain ... Inuit leaders should be responsible for ensuring that women, youth and Elders are adequately represented in their organizations ... Inuit leaders have additional responsibilities as public figures and role models. These include not engaging in conduct which hurts other people, breaks laws, or is harmful to Inuit society ... Acts of violence against women and children, including sexual assault, child abuse, child sexual abuse, and wife battering are absolutely unacceptable, and any leader who engages in such conduct should immediately step aside.

Beside its primary message, this proposal clearly reveals a malaise within the Inuit political sphere. Flaherty's proposal was not discussed at the time but rather put aside, probably because it could have been a subject of dissension if it had been debated publicly. Internal quarrels certainly would have marred the impression of cohesion which the Inuit have been trying to reinforce for decades in their dealings with the Canadian political system. Was the silence surrounding this proposal due to the urgent need to give priority to more critical topics for the Inuit or due to the fear that Inuit values regarding women would be misunderstood on the Canadian stage?

In the end, the subject was not publicly discussed or debated until the Nunavut Implementation Commission proposed a unique model based on gender parity for the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut. The campaign for the referendum necessary to implement the proposal revealed another form of resistance, rooted in the electorate, to the inclusion of women in the political arena.

The Campaign for the Gender Parity Referendum

The referendum was a confusing time for the electorate, probably because the most vehement opponent of the gender parity proposal was a prominent Inuit woman, Manikot Thompson, Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs and Minister Responsible for the Women's Directorate in the Northwest Territories, at that time. According to Jackie Steele and Manon Tremblay (2005), Thompson dramatically influenced the outcome of the ballot:

The fact that, as a woman, [Manikot Thompson] could protest so vehemently against the proposal, threw people into confusion about who legitimately held the feminine viewpoint with regards to equality. (37)⁸

Thompson argued that the proposition was paternalistic towards women and discriminatory towards men. Moreover, she challenged the accounts of Inuit women who had reported systemic barriers in the political arena. Thompson may not have experienced, in fact, any significant barriers to political participation herself, yet she showed no sign of solidarity with women who pointed out difficulties.

On the other hand, John Amagoalik, who defended the proposition, emphasized the need for the political arena to be more inclusive, enabling it to benefit from the specific contributions of men and women:

Yes, women have made great strides in recent times. But they still face systemic barriers. One of them is an attitude that women need to prove themselves first. Women don't need to prove themselves to me. I believe in women's abilities and strengths and look forward to their positive contributions. I do not want to wait until someone has judged women to be "ready" ... A gender-equal Legislative Assembly is a picture of tolerance and mutual respect. (Amagoalik 1997)

The campaign was one-sided. Apart from an organized group of opponents from Kaniqliniq (Rankin Inlet) named “Qauliqtuq,” challengers to the referendum proposal did not organize committees to present their views at the meetings. The vast majority of floating voters did have an opportunity to attend a formal debate; however, they were faced with an uneven debate between pugnacious and articulate defenders of the proposal and a few isolated angry members of the public. Describing the situation, Jens Dahl (1997) said:

[The] plebiscite results do not evidence that these visits had any positive effect for their cause—in fact the opposite is true. This can be explained by the fact that many people felt intimidated by the one-sided campaign. Why didn’t you bring representatives from the opposition? Who has paid for your campaign? These and similar questions were repeatedly asked during the meetings and by the media. (46)

According to one of our informants, who attended several of the meetings, few women dared to speak up, thereby depriving the debate of their point of view.⁹ Interestingly, strong reactions from the public reveal an underlying animosity towards associations such as Pauktuutit (representing Inuit women in Canada).¹⁰

A man spoke up, he was very angry “that women shouldn’t be given advantages like that ... he said ... that the women have stupid associations like Pauktuutit or women’s group who are getting so powerful.”¹¹

The meetings for the referendum turned into a forum for some people in the audience to express their complete discomfort with a women’s association becoming too influential.

This criticism leads us to consider the issue of the visibility of female representatives in the public sphere in the light of certain features of Inuit culture. In her work on Inuit female writers of autobiography, an activity that places women at the centre of public life, Robin McGrath draws our attention to the attitude of restraint that is required for women in Inuit culture: “Inuit women appear to observe taboo against drawing attention to themselves as mature adults.”¹² This social behaviour, part of a code of conduct dictated by custom, seems difficult to reconcile with the role expected of a political representative according to the Canadian political model. The latter requires visibility and grants more prestige to people with a high-level, and therefore highly visible, position in the hierarchical system. Thus, the Canadian political model indirectly gives way to patronizing attitudes.

Oral data that we collected which dealt with the campaign for the referendum on gender parity in Nunavut, outlines a potentially embedded structure of this phenomenon. This structure directs us to consider the possibility that the gender tensions within the political sphere may be rooted in tensions in the private sphere of the Inuit household.

The Inuit Household under Scrutiny

During the 1997 campaign for the referendum on gender equality, supporters of the proposition considered the arguments of equality as being complementary to,

and rooted in, Inuit culture. These supporters presented the proposition for gender parity as a way of helping to reinforce these notions. They wanted to recreate the interaction between men and women, as recommended by their interpretation of certain Inuit values, in the Legislative Assembly.

[Rita Arey, Status of Women Council] said gender parity is a reflection of what has always been part of traditional Inuit culture. "Women's opinions were respected and sought out because they provided balance and harmony in decisions affecting the well-being of the community as a whole ... We must regain this balance by making sure that women's voices are equally heard in the legislature. (Bourgeois 1997)

The debate on equality did not take place, but the initiative unveiled a latent form of anxiety rooted in the notion of the family unit.

The settlement of the Inuit in communities had challenged the integrity of male status, and a social malaise began to be detected in Canadian Inuit society as early as in the mid-twentieth century.¹³ Meanwhile, women had managed to make their way into the education system.¹⁴ The omnipresence of women in schools and, consequently, their success in the world of work were considered a threat to the social order and balance within the traditional unit of the couple. Traditional gender roles are reversed when the woman becomes the breadwinner, and this leads to uncertainty about the respective responsibilities of the man and woman in the household. As a result, many young Inuit men find it difficult today to fit into society as it is proposed to them.

Because of their presence, even sporadic, at school, they [young men] cannot follow hunters on the ice floe, or on the land. Paradoxically, these young people have attended school too much to be able to become excellent providers (seal, caribou, fish), and not enough to expect living well as salaried employees. Thus, they feel humiliated, downgraded, without future prospects and the suicide rate or suicide attempt rate give cause for concern. (Therrien 1992)¹⁵

Consequently, men and women, as couples, need to re-create a fragile balance within their household. This new balance within the couple, thus re-formed, is often maintained by Christian beliefs, which have a strong influence in the North. Redefinition of the roles of men and women in each household is left to individual discretion and influences. The Pentecostal Church, for instance, proposes rather fixed roles for men and women, placing strict boundaries on the sphere of influence acceptable for women and confining them to the domestic sphere.¹⁶ The gender parity proposal, however, implied the equal representation of men and women in the political arena. Negative reactions to this proposal reveal a need on the part of many Christians among the Inuit to cling to a stable definition of male and female relationships in the household, a definition based on an interpretation of Holy Scripture.

And there was a man who was so angry, he was even talking about his Bible. [Laugh.] He said that according to his Bible it should be the man to be the head of the house [low voice], according to the Bible ... I finally said "in these years 1900, I think you and I have a different Bible."¹⁷

According to Manon Tremblay, the referendum was, in fact, asking the population in Nunavut to choose which version of their tradition was most relevant:

The debate aroused by the proposal on gender equality was such that the population was actually asked to choose which version of Inuit tradition (meaning before or after contact with the Christian civilization, or a combination of both periods) constituted the foundation of relations between the sexes and democratic practices. (Steele and Manon 2005, 36)

Concerning these “democratic practices,” Françoise Héritier, a French anthropologist, considers that the theoretical universal equality between the sexes emphasized in democratic states, such as in Canada, reaffirms a latent transcendental inequality between the sexes.¹⁸ In the case of the Nunavut Inuit, the public had to reach a decision, taking into account discriminatory, unspoken rules derived from an exogenous political model on top of the cultural and religious issues with which they were familiar and that only few Inuit women had questioned so far. In the end, the debate mainly concerned different understandings of tradition, but the resulting answers created more instability within the couple relationship, generating fear and anxiety. Many people in the electorate may have even considered the restrictions on the involvement of women in the public arena as a method of maintaining a fragile balance within the household and society.

According to Jens Dahl, the strong opposition from many women towards the proposal was grounded in a desire to protect the integrity of their household.

Any initiative which can be interpreted as a threat to the family will be rejected out of fear for more social problems. Regardless of who has the best solutions, in Nunavut there is a strong ideological desire to strengthen close family relations—even if there are many indications in everyday life that point in the opposite direction. (1997, 47)

The strong will to protect the family arises from a context in which women are exposed to high rates of domestic violence, and men are at a high risk of attempting suicide.¹⁹ This further implies a lack of confidence towards women and, especially, towards their ability to share power with their male counterparts.

Mary Wilman, from the Nunavut Implementation Training Committee, attempted to find out more about the failure of the proposal. She concluded that the massive success of women in school, and their chances of becoming the next elite in Inuit society, might have influenced the ballot.

Some people have indicated to me perhaps that it is because men don't know how to cope with the women and power and at the same time women perhaps don't know how to balance power. It is that we, as women, should take the power for granted, that we should use it well, in partnership with the men. Because we have power doesn't mean that we should disrespect the men.²⁰

In the aftermath of the referendum, what is left of the definition of the roles of men and women on the political stage? At first glance, it seems that the entire debate was given a new twist when it took on a symbolic dimension. When the Chamber of the Legislative Assembly was conceptualized and presented to the

public in 1999, officially it was meant to represent the iglu, the Inuit household, in which man and woman share equal authority. For example, when the house is in session, the mace of Nunavut rests in a carving depicting the hands of a man and a woman, fashioned in granite and labradorite. When the mace was unveiled, it was clear that the Government of Nunavut intended the mace to symbolize “the equal respect for both genders of the population.”²¹ Is this symbol a politically correct way of displaying the image of unity among Inuit men and women? Is it a message advising families to apply this pattern of equality to themselves, taking the Assembly as a model, an embedded image of the iglu? Does this symbolic dimension present equality and partnership as a reality, or as an image of Inuit politics that the Inuit political elite wants to establish towards the population and towards the world?

The silent crisis in Canadian Inuit politics, where men and women oppose one another, is rooted in a broader social malaise that was unspoken for decades. Interestingly, as a result of the need for the couple to re-establish trust at different levels, some female representatives in Greenland have shown a cautious attitude towards the issue. In an interview recorded in 2004, Henriette Rasmussen, Minister of Culture, Education, Language, Science and Ecclesiastical Affairs in the Greenlandic Home Rule Government, describes such a stand:

I am aware that as a woman who has been struggling for the women’s rights in Greenland before, I see now that in education there are more women in education than men. Maybe one day, there will be more women educated than men and it is a bad thing for our society ... We have to be careful ... (because we have been educated, or whatever, we have power) that we should do this to men. No! We shouldn’t! Now we are suddenly in a situation in Greenland that we have to be aware of the boy’s identity not to get them to be minor, you know. We have to look at the men’s rights, men’s feelings.²²

She encourages the enhancement of the role of men in society, with the side effect of re-establishing a balance in the household and, by extension, in the political sphere (the topic she was actually asked about).²³ Henriette Rasmussen demonstrates the necessity to share power and pay attention to men’s feelings, which may be a way for the public to grant women legitimacy as leaders. According to this quote, there seems to be, in Greenland as well, a need for mutual respect within the couple in order to fend off the imbalance in Inuit society caused by the pre-eminence of women in the work force.

Inuit women in the Canadian political sphere, and especially in Nunavut, are under close scrutiny. They are paving the way for the next generation of women in politics. The way they deal with the male electorate and the concept of the couple may be the key to their finding their own legitimacy on the political stage.

Conclusion

This analysis has shown that balance on the Canadian Inuit political stage depends upon stability in the household within an embedded structure. In other sectors of

the public sphere, such as the economy or art, discriminatory practices toward women persist. The research in this paper can be the basis for further study of this complex phenomenon, with a focus on the household and a more holistic approach, by comparing the various effects of this phenomenon on diverse sectors of the Inuit public sphere.

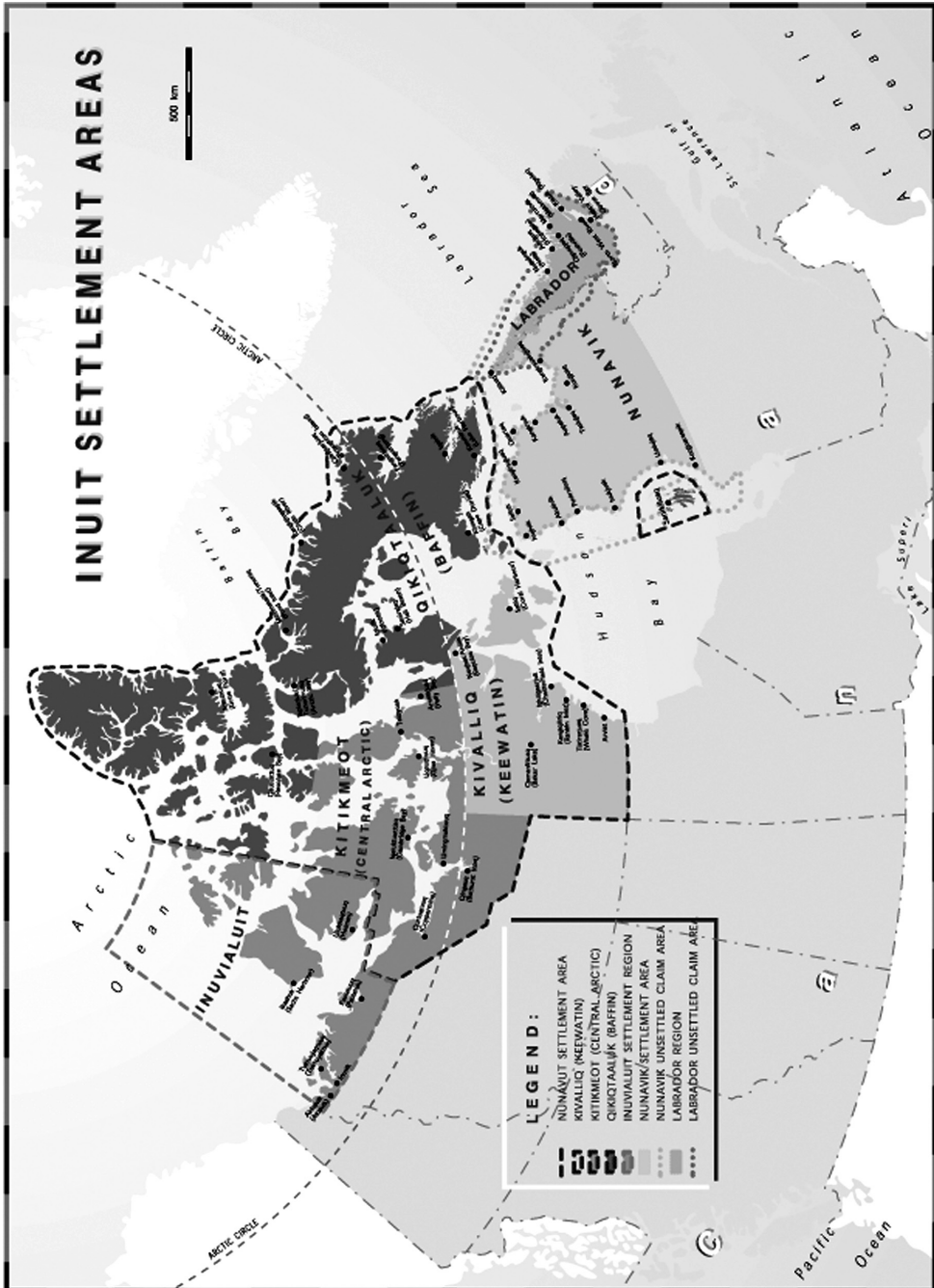
The way the Inuit Canadian elite deals with the sensitive topic of dissension between Inuit men and women in the political arena is worth a closer look. To what extent is Inuit political discourse concealing internal Inuit conflicts? **What** are the deep-seated motives of the Canadian Inuit decision-making elite?²⁴ How does the Inuit elite in Canada deal with topics of dissension that challenge the unity in the political discourse of the Inuit at all levels of politics, from local to international?

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Appendix A: Map of Inuit Settlement Areas in Canada.

Source: <www.makivik.org/images/map/11_inuit_settlement_areas.gif>



Endnotes

- 1 The Inuktitut term “iglu” is a generic term. It refers to various kinds of accommodation. In its most common use, it designates a house.
- 2 At the federal level, there are only two Inuit political representatives: Nancy Karetak-Lindell, Member of Parliament for Nunavut to the House of Commons, and Charlie Watt, who was appointed to the Senate in 1984.
- 3 For instance, at the Ottawa urban community centre Tunngasuvvingat Inuit, at least six of the eight members of the board are women.
- 4 It was made particularly obvious during the campaign for gender equality at the Nunavut Legislative Assembly in 1997.
- 5 Some researchers, such as Jens Dahl (1997) from the Department of Eskimology of the University of Copenhagen, as well as Jackie Steele and Manon Tremblay (2005) from the Research Centre on Women and Politics at the University of Ottawa, currently are focusing on analyzing these events.
- 6 At that time, the Nunavut Implementation Commission recommended that the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut would be composed of the same number of male and female MLAs. Each constituency would have been represented by a man and a woman.
- 7 Pauktuutit is a national non-profit association representing Canadian Inuit women. It was incorporated in 1984. It has various aims, such as “act and be recognized as the official representative for Inuit women,” “work towards better conditions for Inuit women,” “promote self-confidence and self-reliance amongst Inuit women,” “promote the equality of Inuit women in all levels of Canadian governmental and non-governmental structures,” and “encourage the involvement of Inuit women in all levels of Canadian society.” See <www.pauktuutit.ca/about_e.asp>.
- 8 Translation was provided for the purpose of this article by Carole Cancel.
- 9 This observation is consistent with Jens Dahl (1997).
- 10 It is noteworthy that Pauktuutit, the national Canadian Inuit women’s association, was involved in the campaign without having originally initiated it.
- 11 Interview with an informant, Spring 2005, Ottawa.
- 12 Robin McGrath (1990) insists on the restraint attitude expected from the woman as an obstacle for some of them to publish their autobiographies or get support from their relatives for doing so.
- 13 It is noteworthy that when the Canadian political model was gradually introduced in the North, the government encouraged the Inuit to get involved in local political representation. See Minor (2002).
- 14 In the 2001 census, the highest level of schooling is quite revealing. The percentage of Nunavut Inuit with a graduate certificate increased dramatically within the last 20 years, with very little difference between men and women. On the contrary, the percentage of Nunavut Inuit with a university certificate, diploma or degree has been gradually decreasing for the last 20 years, with a growing prominence of women, compared to men. For instance, in 1991, among the population aged 20 to 34 in Nunavut, 9.1% of women have such a degree compared to 6.7% of their male counterparts. See the 2001 census on the Statistics Canada website at <www12.statcan.ca>.
- 15 Translation of this article was provided to the author by Carole Cancel.
- 16 The role attributed to women by the Pentacostal Church requires further research, all the more so as evangelical Christianity is becoming quite influential in Northern communities. It will no doubt constitute a factor of deep change among the Inuit.
- 17 Interview with an informant, Spring 2005, Ottawa.
- 18 Françoise Héritier (2002) in French calls this transcendental inequality between the sexes “valence différentielle des sexes.” This expression could be literally translated as “differential valency between the sexes.” Translation provided by Carole Cancel.
- 19 In her recent article, Karla Jessen Williamson (2004, 190–91) indicates that the suicide rate among Nunavut males is more than three times higher than women’s.

- 20 Mary Wilman, on the radio program “Boréal hebdo,” 31 May 1997.
- 21 Quotation from a leaflet entitled “Mace of Nunavut,” distributed at the entrance of the Nunavut Legislative Assembly building.
- 22 Interview with Henriette Rasmussen, 19 October 2004, Paris.
- 23 It is noteworthy that recent research in Greenland has been focusing on Inuit men’s experience in order to shed a new light on social phenomena such as domestic violence and difficulties in relationships between Inuit men and women. See Williamson (2004, 187–205).
- 24 The analysis of the new data we gathered in Iqaluit (Nunavut) in the autumn of 2005 will provide us with further insight on the Inuit political discourse in Nunavut.

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