

# The Political Economy of Prostitution and Women's Human Rights

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*Cet article aborde la prostitution comme un phénomène social qui devrait être analysé dans un contexte d'économie politique. L'auteure suggère que l'évolution de la prostitution est due à la transformation du capitalisme néolibéral des récentes décennies. L'autonomie envahissante du marché a créé une industrie du sexe qui est devenue le secteur économique le plus profitable à la grandeur de la planète. Cette transformation est causée par des marchés qui se sont dissociés de la réalité sociale qu'aucune loi ne peut contrôler et qui a mis à la place une logique du prédateur qui commodifie non seulement la nature, l'argent et le travail des femmes mais aussi leur corps et leur sexualité.*

Neoliberal globalization and the growth of prostitution are linked social phenomena that have progressed together. The prostitution industry lies at the intersection of two processes: the neo-liberal reorganization of the world economy which took place in the 1970s and 1980s, and the restructuring of patriarchal societies which began to be visible in the 1980s and was well-established by the 1990s.

## Neoliberal Agenda

The economic reorganization that transnational corporate hegemony has imposed worldwide in the last few decades has achieved a global transfer of economic resources to transnational capital through the adoption of neo-liberal agendas and policies by governments in every region of the world. Among many other classic neo-liberal measures, five core elements of the neo-liberal agenda are particularly relevant to the growing global nature and economic importance of prostitution:

1) The existence of global “disembedded markets” (Fraser) which are under neither state regulation nor social control. These are products of Free Trade agreements for untrammelled “trade” under the authority of the World Trade Organization, not only in raw materials and manufactured goods, but also in services, capital and even life forms;

2) The dominance of a predatory economic logic that has commodified every area of life and nature without exception. For women, this includes not only their money and work but also their bodies and sexuality itself;

3) Intensified brutal corporate enclosure and exploitation of resources in expanding areas of the globe with devastating consequences for the natural environment and for the subsistence of millions;

4) A profound break with the social contract agreed after World War II in Europe that gave rise to the so-called welfare state in many nations. In the name of debt and deficit reduction, social services and public amenities everywhere are being abandoned by governments as “costs” requiring taxation too heavy for corporations to bear and remain internationally “competitive.”

5) The imposition of Structural Adjustment programs (SAPs) forcing privatization, cutbacks and austerity through neo-liberal “restructuring,” on nations with external “debt.” These SAPs, which are imposed by international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), require governments to shift their priorities and resources from production for local needs to production for trade which earns foreign currency to repay external debt.

Neo-liberal restructuring with its

intense wealth accumulation and concentration has resulted in unprecedented poverty and inequality in all parts of the world. Large numbers of impoverished people are finding it difficult to survive. Though this is true even in parts of the world where it was once thought poverty could be overcome, the impacts are far greater in poor countries and in countries forced by international institutions to undergo severe neo-liberal re-structuring programs.

### **Prostitution**

The sexual contract of modern times divides women between marriage and prostitution mandating, as Carole Pateman (1995) explains, one woman for each man and a few women for all men. Currently the transformation of many patriarchal institutions, above all marriage and prostitution, has put this contract in crisis. Small numbers of women from various parts of the world have acquired more autonomy and freedom in both the family context and outside marriage. At the same time, and in apparent contrast, the number of women and girls in the sex industry has increased exponentially. Ever younger women are recruited for sexual exploitation. In 2009, 48 percent of these women were under eighteen, leading Richard Poulin, a well-known expert on prostitution, to conclude that, “prostitution is being pedophilised” (Vaughan).

Prostitution is a social practice that enables men to obtain sex in exchange for money. As one of the two social practices by which men ensure sexual access to a woman’s body, it is a fundamental part of the sexual contract and one of the principal mechanisms of male control (Pateman 267). Prostitution is thus a foundational institution of patriarchy; a fundamental form of economic and sexual exploitation of women. We must not forget that men are the ones demanding prostitution

and women the ones providing it. Consequently, prostitution is a crucial area of study for feminists who have for three centuries sought to develop an interpretive framework to understand women’s position of inferiority and men’s dominance.

Prostitution, as a social phenomenon anchored in the symbolic and material structures of our northern and southern societies, is a material and symbolic reality underpinning and promoting masculine hegemony as it fuels the global economy.

It influences the formation and meaning of masculine and feminine normativities, consolidating patriarchally prescribed masculinity and femininity, and reproducing an excessively sexualised normative female model. Thus, prostitution is solidly anchored in the collective imaginary. The social definitions that naturalise prostitution consolidate the material realities in which it occurs.

### **Capitalism, Colonialism and Patriarchy in the “New” Sex Industry**

Until the 1970s, prostitution was a set of small local businesses with no economic impact on national accounts. Patriarchy was its central defining dimension. Local women engaged in prostitution with madams and bosses that managed these small businesses, sometimes paternalistically.

There were many small “sex contact clubs.” These were intimate, almost family places. These days there are increasingly fewer of them, and those that remain have gone through a radical transformation in how they operate. These small clubs are disappearing and being replaced by mega striptease joints with showgirls exhibiting themselves with as little clothing as possible. These businesses sometimes even operate with a hotel licence. Small venues where women more or less discreetly engaged in a

form of light prostitution and could earn good money without being forced to sleep with any and all clients are now a thing of the past (De León 71).

There were hardly any migrant women in this earlier form of prostitution and the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation and criminal circuits was virtually unheard of. In other words, this form of prostitution corresponded to the capitalism that came before neoliberalism. Its defining dimension was patriarchy.

Today prostitution is structured equally also by neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism/racism. Males of all social classes believe they have a right to sexually access the bodies of women that are poor, immigrants, or from cultures and regions in the world that the ethnocentric West sees as inferior. The ethnic/racial and class component in the consumption of sex in rich and poor countries can vary, but the sexual exploitation of women by men is invariable in all social strata. “In every prostitution phenomenon, ethnic and national minorities are overexploited” (Poulin “Vamos”). Men from their own countries, neighbouring regions and Western countries come to buy cheap sex from women that need resources to survive. Although the class aspect was present in prostitution prior to neoliberalism, women’s and their families’ poverty or extreme poverty has, today, become one of its fundamental elements.

Economic globalization has made it possible for prostitution to connect the rich north and the debt-ridden south. The south exports women for sexual consumption by northern men. And northern men travel to southern countries to buy sex. This creates a new connection between northern and southern men. Regardless of the extent of their resources, western men and males in the rest of the world share the possibility of sexually using women that neoliberal capitalism

has made available globally. In some countries, the “right” that men believe they have to sexually use prostituted women has been confirmed by the legalization of the industry.

Class, racial, and cultural differences do not prevent men establishing and reproducing this brotherhood. By sexually accessing prostituted women, men confirm their position

not end with the series of businesses directly engaged in prostitution. Many other economic actors profit from it, serve its interests and help to prop it up. These include airlines, hotels, alcoholic drink companies, bank credit cards, and newspapers. What would happen if the companies producing and distributing alcoholic beverages refused to supply brothels,

The patriarchal, neoliberal capitalist and ethnic/racial structures of power must all be recognized to understand prostitution today. The sex industry and the increasing number of women supplying this global business have grown at the intersection of these power systems. But the driving element today is the neo-liberal global economy.

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of control as the dominant gender. Men seeking sex are an interclass masculine collective characterized by their dominance over women. Thus, prostitution plays an increasing role in the reproduction of contemporary global patriarchy. Feminist theory has analyzed the patriarchal nature of modern institutions and critical theory has identified their class nature. Today patriarchal and class interests find a lethal alliance in the interclass character of the sex seekers and the lack of resources of the women engaging in prostitution. Patriarchal logic and class logic merge in a toxic dynamic that is central in our civilization.

Neoliberal capitalism enables certain social phenomena—in this case prostitution—that were previously only national to become global. Women’s bodies as a business, no longer belong within the limits of the nation state. Prostitution forms part of an international sex industry encompassing a wide variety of businesses, from macro-brothels or striptease clubs to books, from massage parlours to “escort” agencies, from films to pornography magazines, and including sex tourism. The sex industry does

or if newspapers did not agree to publish advertisements for venues or apartments where prostitution takes place?

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Trafficking, sex tourism and the mail-order bride business has ensured that women’s severe inequality can be transferred beyond national boundaries as women of poor countries can be sexually bought by men from rich countries in a new form of sexual colonization (Jeffreys 17).

Prostitution is a prime example of neoliberal delocalisation. Although the bodies of prostituted women have always been used as commodities, in this age of global trade they provide unprecedented profits at low cost and have become a highly sought-after commodity by governments seeking foreign currency, traffickers, and pimps.

### **Prostitution and Poverty: Feminization of Survival**

Neo-liberal social and public service cutbacks and privatisation policies, whether imposed nationally or enforced through Structural Adjustment Programs, invariably have an increase in unpaid work at home as a correlate, since those tasks that the state renounces or does not assume are silently passed on to the family (Sassens “Actores y espacios” 391). Cuts in health, education, and pensions among others, force women to spend more time providing care and on domestic duties. Neoliberal economic policies are also intensifying the segregation of the labour market in such a way that a very high percentage of women earn poverty-line wages, work part-time, work in the informal economy and have precarious employment conditions.

Manuel Castells has noted a deep segregation in national and global labour markets between self-programmable workers who are educated and generic workers who lack the training and qualifications to be able to reprogram for other jobs. He identifies education as the variable

that distinguishes these two types of workers (375). Cultural training leads to the paradise self-programmable workers enjoy and lack of education leads to the hell of generic workers. However, education is not the only segregation logic, since gender, immigration, race and culture are also factors. How else can we explain that the majority of self-programmable workers are men and the majority of generic workers are women? Women generic workers tend to work in market sectors, such as maquiladoras or domestic work. In countries with high living standards this type of work is mostly performed by immigrants. Generic workers are badly paid doing interchangeable, flexible, and insecure work that Sassen ("Actores") has likened to new forms of slavery.

High unemployment rates, poverty wages, weak economies and austerity budgets are populating alternative survival circuits of migrant labour including the transfer of women from indebted southern countries to those in the north for varied forms of employment including prostitution. Women who are neither immigrants nor extremely poor may occasionally and exceptionally seek to improve their situation by earning the fast money that prostitution can provide. However, without the neo-liberal shredding of the social fabric and the exclusionary labour dynamic that are at the heart of these survival conditions, prostitution would not have grown as it has, leading Sassen to suggest that the "feminization of poverty" long identified by feminists has, today, become the "feminization of survival" (Sassen *Contra-geografia*)

### **Prostitution and "Development": The Commodification of Women**

Prostitution plays a central role in the national finances and economies of countries with high poverty rates

and/or external debt. The sex industry is not only becoming an essential sector for economic development, it is integral to the development strategies of some states and regions in the world (Poulin *Prostitution* 10). The export of male and female workers and the remittances they send home to family, friends and communities are essential means for many South American and Asian countries to mitigate unemployment and provide the foreign currency necessary to service their external debt. The Philippines, for example, has expanded and diversified the process of exporting its citizens "to the extent that remittances have become the third major source of foreign currency in recent years" (Sassen "Actores" 390).

This economic strategy requires the semi-institutionalization of survival circuits by governments that come to rely on them. And it is mainly women that circulate through them for domestic work and prostitution. The very existence of these circuits highlights that prostitution does not arise spontaneously. Through the promotion of labour migration, including for prostitution, as a tool of economic growth, an ideological, social and institutional climate is being created to turn this into a legal business and facilitate its expansion and normalization. The aim and effect is for women to become just another form of consumption reducing prostituted women to commodities.

As the growth of supply fuels a strong increase in demand, the idea silently takes hold that buying sex is simply an economic activity. Prostitution is part of the dynamic of many businesses that reward clients with women for sexual use when negotiating a deal or after it has been reached. In this and other ways prostitution is linked to the formation of global markets, the growth and consolidation of transnational networks, and criminal economy.

The institutionalization of this process is highly facilitated by the World Bank and the International Monetary fund that encourage indebted nations to build leisure and entertainment industries whose profits will help ensure their external national debt can be repaid. Structural adjustment programmes propose loans to states to establish tourism and entertainment companies (Poulin, *Prostitution: La mondialisation incarnée*). Child and adult prostitution plays a fundamental role in this economic sector, which, is especially viewed as a source of rural economic development for poor regions (Jeffreys 71). Widespread individual desperation and significant institutional support from national governments and international agencies have led to whole regions of the globe becoming "prostitutionalized" and "pornographized" (Poulin *Prostitution* 11).

Sex tourism is a central element in the economies of countries as diverse as Holland, Thailand, and China. As early as the 1960s, the Minister of the Interior in Thailand publicly defended the expansion of the sex industry to promote tourism and help his country take off economically. Fuelled by sex tourism, the number of foreign visitors to Thailand increased from two million in 1981 to seven million in 1996 (Bales 83-84). The Korean government estimated that prostitution represented 4.4 per cent of GDP in 2002. And the sex industry in Holland, legalised in 2001, represented five per cent of their GDP. In China it is estimated that this industry accounts for eight per cent of their economy. In 2004 an increase of 12 per cent in Chivas Regal's earnings was attributed, in a report, to its association with Thai brothels (Jeffreys 15-17).

The relation of sex tourism to obtaining strong currency was clearly acknowledged by a Thai prime minister when he explained "that a

generation of women had to be sacrificed to ensure his country's economic development. In Gabon, one minister declared on the radio that prostitution should be legalised because it is the only means of developing tourism in this nation in West-Central Africa" (Poulin "Vamos").

But the phenomenon of prostitution has many faces. Prostituted

going through the government-controlled program for the entry of entertainers. These women are recruited for singing and entertaining, but frequently, perhaps mostly, they are forced into prostitution as well. (Sassen "Actores y espacios" 394)

As this sociologist points out, in

for the father as well. These forms of prostitution are on the rise in India (Manier).

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**All these practices (prostitution, mail-order brides in the Philippines, polyandry, the sale of brides and children in India, the importing of brides from Nepal), among many other phenomena, make it clear that prostitution cannot be understood outside the context of patriarchal control and violence.**

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women are not only found in brothels, apartments, huts or the streets. Child brides and the sale of mail-order brides are also part of the commodification of women's bodies and sexuality

Until 1989, it was legal in the Philippines for marriage agencies specialising in mail-order brides to recruit young Philippine women mainly for men in the agricultural communities of Japan and the United States. Corazón Aquino's government made this "sale" of women illegal that year due to mounting evidence of abuse committed by their foreign husbands. Even though this mail-order-bride business is now illegal, dismantling the structure of marriage agencies, which operate illegally and continue to export women to other countries, has proved impossible.

The second major group of women to leave the Philippines for employment, works in the "entertainment sector," mainly in Japan. Over five hundred entertainment brokers:

provide women for the sex industry in Japan, where it is basically supported or controlled by organized gangs rather than

the United States, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) reported that violence and sexual abuse against mail-order brides by husbands and other males in their family was becoming more acute.

Millions of women throughout the world are commodified for prostitution and for marriages that are often forms of prostitution in which "brides" are socialized sexually by other men in the family. Manier has described the purchase of brides in states in India where women are scarce. Men in these regions go to other regions where there are needy families that sell their daughters for a few dozen rupees. Some traffickers even go to neighbouring countries, such as Bangladesh and Nepal, to obtain supplies. The life of these women is marked by violence and slavery, since many bought women live in harsh conditions and, when they are not treated as slaves, are made by their in-laws to feel they are barely worthy of being servants. Polyandry is also practised in some areas in India. This is when a family has no resources, but many brothers, and a bride is purchased for all the males in the family, sometimes even

outside the context of patriarchal control and violence. At the same time, sexual exploitation combines with slavery and the exploitation of the work women perform for free in some of these domestic contexts.

**Prostitution, Neo-Liberalism and the Criminal Economy**

Prostitution today is a major international industry closely linked to criminal networks which have become an essential feature of the new global economy in many regions (Castells, "La era" 194). It is virtually impossible to find brothels or macro-brothels whose business activity is not connected in some way to criminal mafia which control the entire process, from the acquisition of adolescents and women in their countries of origin to their insertion in sex contact clubs in the destination countries. The "raw material" of this industry is women's bodies, which have become a commodity that meets the two necessary conditions of neo-liberalism's global financial products: low-risk business and high returns. Today, prostituted women are indisputable financial products.

These criminal networks operate by means of local independent gangs, and every criminal organisation has its own resources to conclude its deals, with violence forming a routine part of the operation. However, the most important aspect is organized crime's "safety mechanism," the network of agents of the law, judges and politicians who are on the payroll and, once in the system, captive for life. Prostitution as an industry is not only linked to the criminal economy, it is also underpinned by a network of illicit money laundering businesses which, as Castells explains, form the matrix of global crime and its direct link with global capitalism (Castells 228-232),

To understand the complexity and growing extent of prostitution, the trafficking of women and girls and the criminal networks that play such a large role in the neo-liberal global economy, we need to analyze the links between neo-liberalism and patriarchy; between the economy and culture of (rich and poor) nations that support internal prostitution markets and the export of women to markets in countries with a demand for sex. In poor regions and communities where women's lives are greatly devalued and women treated with contempt, women are more likely to be sold to trafficking networks. Castells stresses the need to recognize cultural factors in the formation, operation and strategies of criminal networks. Accordingly, I would like to highlight that the rise of the prostitution industry and related criminal networks within the neo-liberal economy must be understood in light of the sexual contract crisis and the breakdown of the modern patriarchal order.

Neo-liberal restructuring imposed by national governments and/or by multilateral credit institutions, lack of market controls, high unemployment rates, and the extreme poverty of millions of women and

their families form the ideal breeding ground for illicit economies and illegal businesses. Where survival is difficult, opportunity structures are scarce, social mobility is reduced to an unimaginable extent, and states are weak, criminal businesses arise to prey on an extremely reduced and precarious labour market. Slavery-like work "opportunities" appear to offer survival to millions of people without employment. The globalization of world markets and establishment of transnational networks has engendered international "alternative survival circuits" for people seeking such work abroad. In some cases these are legal, for instance income from work performed by emigrants, and in other cases illegal, such as sexual commodification networks of women and children (Sassen *Contrageografias* 80).

The global sex industry and the trafficking of women is one of the unintended consequences of uncontrolled global markets and governments devoted to voracious neoliberal capitalism. Once there is an infrastructure for globalization, processes that have previously operated in national or regional areas can scale up to the global level. Institutional infrastructure for cross-border flows and global markets can be used for purposes other than the ones they were originally devised for. Human trafficking networks can use the financial and transport systems created for transnational companies. The resulting growth of the sex industry and transfer of women from indebted southern countries to those in the north is just one example of what Saskia Sassen has called "counter-geographies of globalization" (389)

Legalisation of prostitution in some countries and almost complete neo-liberal market freedom (lack of controls by states) has facilitated the development of this "trade." The sex

industry would be unable to grow without such direct and indirect institutional support. Without this, as in Sweden, prostitution shrinks. With it, girls, teenagers and women living in regions of the world with high poverty rates, contempt for women, and family aspirations for betterment, are at potential risk of "delivery and sale" to trafficking networks, as Kevin Bales has discussed with reference to Thailand (39-47). The neo-liberal economy has engendered new forms of poverty and inequality by legal and illegal means. This violent economic redistribution could not be achieved or sustained without new forms of violence. Prostitution is at the intersection between violence and poverty. This sexual and economic slavery is most evident in places of social deprivation suffering from decline and abandonment. For instance, in industrial estates such as the Marconi colony in Madrid and the most marginal and poorest districts in many cities worldwide. On the whole, the circuits where prostitution takes place are the underground economy and the criminal economy. In this respect, prostitution is a symbol of the new neoliberal economic logic.

### **Women's Human Rights and the Language of Prostitution**

In 1995, Kathleen Barry, recognized the significance of the fact that prostitution had expanded globally and become socially accepted (122-123). Twenty years later this is indisputable. The social practice of prostitution has transformed materially and ideologically. The growth of the sex industry as a major global economy is altering the traditional imaginary of prostitution. Sheila Jeffreys explains: "[In] neoliberalism ... the tolerance of 'sexual freedom' has been merged with a free market ideology to reconstruct prostitution as legitimate 'work,'

which can form the basis of national and international sex industries” (12).

The fact that prostitution has become a global business and an endless source of profit explains why a new language is emerging to mask the reality of the abuse that this patriarchal and capitalist institution is hiding. Poulin points out that the vocabulary has become essentially economic:

egalitarian economic terminology.

Language is not a neutral reality disconnected from the social relationships that unfold in human communities. On the contrary, language is a powerful socialisation agent and a fundamental part of each society’s symbolic fabric. However, as I mentioned earlier, symbolic structures must be consistent with

women’s sexuality.

While the discourse of market-linked rights is used to disguise prostitution activity, the language of liberal political rights is used to legitimise its existence. For example, the feminist insistence on women’s right to freedom and autonomy to choose their own way of life is co-opted to legitimise prostitution.

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**The vocabulary has become essentially economic: prostitution is sex work or the sale of sex services; pimps are businessmen; the sex industry or market is an entertainment and leisure sector; prostitutes are clients or consumers; prostituted women are employed or freelance sex workers; and the workforce they rely on is their body and their body is their own capital.**

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prostitution is sex work or the sale of sex services; pimps are businessmen; the sex industry or market is an entertainment and leisure sector; prostitutes are clients or consumers; prostituted women are employed or freelance sex workers; and the workforce they rely on is their body and their body is their own capital (“Prostitution et traite”). Language is thus an essential tool to legitimize this institution: “the term ‘sex workers’ confirms the idea that sex has become an undisputed commodity for the modern economy. All ethical notions are swept aside, every relationship of dominance drowns in individualist logic” (Legardinier 210). Language is a fundamental tool for defining and interpreting reality, and, today, new neoliberal and patriarchal ideological discourses and representations are being created to cover up the slavery around which the prostitution system has been created. Paradoxically, the use of new economic language hides the economic and sexual exploitation of prostituted women and contributes to legitimising the sex industry. To put it another way, these terms remove this institution’s moral and political power dimensions and wrap it in aseptic and

material structures.

Messages are conveyed through language that strengthens the material networks of patriarchal societies. That is why language is sexist and also why language is a battlefield where people controlling power and defending inequality fight against those desiring change and committed to emancipation. The symbolic construction of masculine and feminine normativities lies in the hands of the patriarchal elites, since they are the ones with ideological power. It is thus essential to question the neutrality of language and to highlight that it is a social rather than natural reality and is not disconnected from power relationships. Neither are social definitions neutral; they legitimize material realities. That is why neoliberal capitalism and patriarchal societies use the language of political and economic market rights to normalize prostitution. An enormous effort is being made to ensure that sexual access to a woman’s body is seen as an issue of consumption for men and free choice for prostituted women. Men have the right to consume sex and women have the right to sell sex/ themselves in this vast market that is

The ideas of consent and free choice are used to defend prostitution as if it were a choice of employment like any other. The individualist political philosophy underlying neoliberalism promotes the idea of limitless free consent in the establishment of contracts. However, all but the most extreme right-wing libertarian accepts that, in unequal systems, contracts must be governed by laws and policies that guarantee the rights of those in a subordinate position and curb the exercise of power by those who possess it. This understanding and defence of women’s human rights is more necessary than ever in relation to the global prostitution industry we know today.

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HOLLY DAY

## The Last Day

I watch my son packing his bags and I have to leave.  
As I do, he asks, "Aren't you going to help me?  
Don't you even care that I'm leaving?" and no,  
I can't help him, because instead of folding shirts and pants  
into a suitcase, I can only think of how to fold him  
back into the infant he once was, how I want  
to find some way to do all of this over because I know  
the next time, I could do everything right.

Through the closed bedroom door, I can hear my son and my husband  
grunt and swear as they drag various pieces of furniture  
out the door, out to the waiting truck, they sound like two men,  
two complete strangers, through the wood, and I  
refuse to go out and hold doors open, I refuse  
to pretend that I am okay with all of this. There are too many regrets  
that have to be saved for future conversations.

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