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The effects of domestic violence in girls' education in Yucatán, México¹

Gli effetti della violenza domestica nell'istruzione delle ragazze nello Yucatán, in Messico

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Abstract

This paper analyses the effects of domestic violence on the educational advancement of indigenous Maya girls living in rural areas in Yucatan, southeast Mexico, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research used a variety of mixed research methods that included a quantitative methodology based on data from institutions dedicated to the promotion of women's educational rights in Mexico and the world. Additionally, a qualitative methodology was utilized through interviews and a historical review. To provide some context, in Merida alone, the capital city of the state of Yucatan located in southeast Mexico, there has been a 114% increase in cases of domestic violence since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Robles, 2022). This, together with high rates of adolescent pregnancy and early marriage in the region, only exacerbates the effects of inequality that as a society we will have to face in the years to come. This study demonstrates the importance of implementing measures to prevent domestic violence during lockdowns that affect the educational advancement, emotional stability and physical security of women.

Keywords: Girls, Education, Coronavirus.

Introduction

This research paper will address the consequences of domestic violence on the educational development of girls living in Yucatan, considering the social factors and culture prevailing in this region. Due to the existing patriarchal family structure (Sánchez de Los Monteros, 2020), generally, the affected population cannot recognize that they are victims of domestic violence, normalizing an abusive situation that has multiple effects on the well-being of women, their sexual and reproductive health, their mental health and their ability to lead the recovery of our societies and economies (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). Unfortunately, domestic violence is

¹ A previous version of this article was published in Spanish as a chapter in the book entitled “Innovación e Investigación educativa para la formación docente”.

intergenerational (INMUJERES, 2020), which means that individuals who today suffer from abuse could be the perpetrators of tomorrow or tend to fall into abusive relationships for the rest of their lives (Kaukinen, 2020).

The main purpose of this article is not only to describe the unprecedented social process that COVID-19 has currently caused but also to recognize the situations of abuse that girls and women lived in confinement during the pandemic, mentioning the governmental programs implemented to counteract this alarming situation.

It should be noted that even though this paper has a gender perspective and is focused on girls and their education, it is recognized that both boys and men can also be victims of domestic violence (Peterman et al., 2020) and that this negative situation occurs worldwide, in all social and educational strata (INMUJERES, 2020).

First, it is necessary to define what violence is, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) violence is the deliberate use of physical force or power, whether in a threat or effective degree, against oneself, another person or a group or community, causing or having a high probability of causing injury, death, psychological damage, developmental disorders or deprivation (WHO, 2002). Considering that this study is focused on adolescent girls and women, in addition, violence and its different manifestations will be analyzed following Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and General Observation No. 13 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which establishes that: violence is understood to be any form of physical or mental harm or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, ill-treatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse while the child is in the custody of the parents, of a legal representative or any other person in charge (UNICEF, 2019). For more detail consult Chart 1.

Tab.1. Definitions of key forms of violence against children and adolescents.

Violence against girls, boys and adolescents	Forms of violence	Definition
Any form of injury or physical or mental abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, ill-treatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse.	Physical	Use of force, both fatal and non-fatal, on children and adolescents, resulting in actual or potential harm.
	Sexual	- Incitement or coercion of a child to engage in any illegal or psychologically damaging sexual activity, use of a child for commercial sexual exploitation, use of a child for the production of images or sound recordings of sexual abuse, sexual slavery, exploitation - sex in tourism and the travel industry, trafficking and sale of children for sexual purposes and forced marriage.
	Emotional	Form of psychological abuse, mental abuse, verbal aggression and emotional neglect. It manifests itself as a persistent harmful relationship with the child, such as making him believe that is worthless, that is not loved or

		loved, that is in danger or that it only serves to satisfy the needs of others, frighten the child, terrorize and threaten him; exploit and corrupt it; scorn and reject; isolate, ignore, and discriminate, insult, humiliate, belittle, ridicule, and hurt their feelings. Exposing to domestic violence or neglecting emotional needs, mental health, medical and educational needs.
	Neglect	Failure to cover the physical or psychological needs of children, as well as protection against danger or in the provision of services when the people responsible for the care of children have the means and knowledge to do so.
	Harmful practices	Norms, laws or customs that are legal, social, community or family-validated or accepted, whose validity translates into acts, obligations, restrictions or rituals that may undermine or harm the physical or psychological integrity of children.
	Institutional	Damage, direct or indirect, and omissions caused by state authorities at all levels. The omissions may consist of not approving or revising legislative or other provisions, not adequately applying the laws and regulations, as well as not having sufficient resources and material, technical and human capacities to detect, prevent and combat violence against children.

Source: UNICEF 2019.

The stress and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 increase these behaviors, which affect boys and girls from isolated populations to a greater extent, considering that the proportion of male violence is higher in rural than urban contexts (UNICEF, 2019).

Accordingly, this research paper collects indicators of domestic violence during the pandemic with records of experiences of adolescent girls who have suffered the consequences of these behaviors and how it has affected them in their educational progress. It is worth mentioning, this is not the only aspect in which it has affected them but has also been one of the reasons why some of them have decided to leave their families to live with their boyfriends even when they are minors².

In this context, if a girl decides to live with her boyfriend, even without children, she is already considered an adult woman, this decision affects her educational progress in some of the rural villages of Yucatan since the same community does

² In Mexico the age of majority is reached at 18 years old.

not accept her reintegration to school (Osorio, 2020), it is worth mentioning that these behaviors are less visible according to the proximity to urban centers, where it is less frequent for adolescent pregnancy and child marriage to stopping the educational advancement of girls compared to the rural context.

Therefore, the research paper will be structured as follows, a description of the theoretical framework to be used in this study, the methodology and data collection, an account of the increase in domestic violence during the pandemic in Mexico, followed by an analysis of the situation in the state of Yucatan with testimonies of girls who have been victims of domestic violence, the resources that the government and society used to continue the educational process despite the existing limiting conditions, interpretation of the data with an analysis of the information, recommendations and conclusions.

1.Theoretical framework

As one of the consequences of domestic violence is the loss of self-esteem of the victims due to the abuses suffered during the process, one of the recommendations for recovery is to be involved in activities where the human being recognizes its value, such as education. This method was successfully used by Paulo Freire through the Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

Through Critical Consciousness Theory (1974), Freire formulated his contributions based on his experience in the literacy process of marginalized populations in Brazil. Freire describes the process in which the human being is valued as a person, which promotes his or her development. In the educational process, marginalized populations recognize themselves as productive members of society, envisioning a future, which sustains hope for a better life, and encourages their improvement when living in difficult conditions. Additionally, fosters care and respect between family members, therefore preventing domestic violence and creating awareness about harmful behaviors.

Considering that behind abusive behavior, there is a desire for control and excessive domination (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020), through education, the victim may realize that the situation in which she lives is not healthy and is not normal nor acceptable, even if its context normalizes domestic violence. In this way, education could be the way for a woman who suffers from abuse situations to discover her inherent value as a human being and to see that it is possible to get out of the circumstances she is in and make changes in her life that could lead to abandoning abusive relationships.

The theoretical contributions of Kaukinen (2020) were also used, who establish that extreme situations such as natural disasters or pandemics may serve as a cathartic event for victims of domestic violence, leading to a turning point in attempts to bring an end to a violent relationship.

2.Case Selection and Methodology

This is a research work that uses mixed research methodologies, with a description of quantitative data collected from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI for its Spanish acronym), the National Institute of Women (INMUJERES), the Secretariat of the Interior in Mexico (SEGOB), the National

System for the Integral Development of the Family (SNDIF) among other institutions, to develop a subsequent analysis.

Descriptive studies seek to specify the properties, characteristics, and profiles of people, groups, communities, processes, objects, or any other phenomenon that is subjected to analysis (Danhke, 1989). In other words, they measure, evaluate, or collect data on various concepts (variables), aspects, dimensions, or components of the phenomenon to be investigated (Hernández et al., 2007), in this case, domestic violence in Yucatan concerning the advance of COVID-19 in the region and its impact on the educational advancement of rural girls.

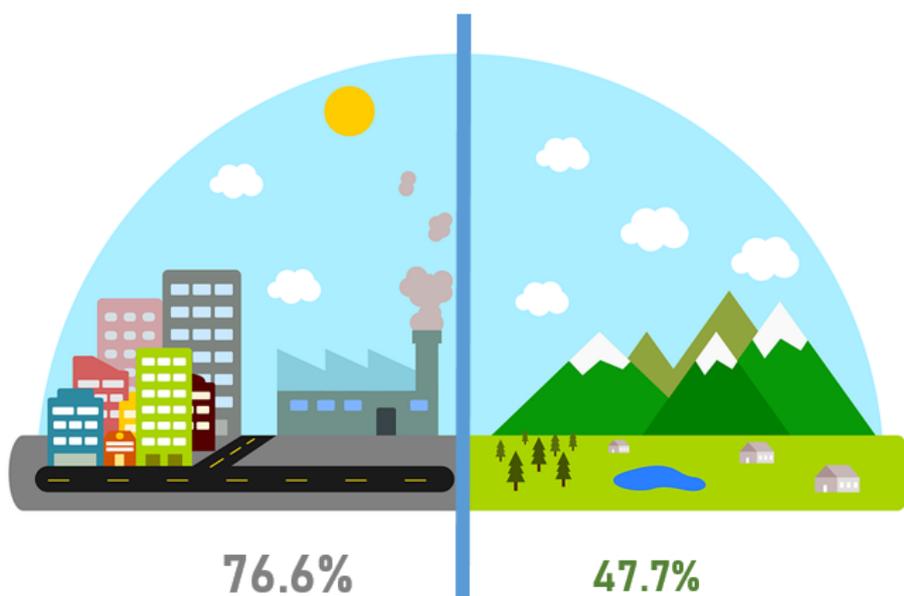
Additionally, the qualitative methodology of social research was used through open interviews, informal talks with girls and their families, mainly their mothers, direct observation during field research, ethnography and documentary revision of the subject.

3.COVID-19 and school closures in Mexico

March 2020 was a historic period in education in Mexico and not for a good reason. The Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), the regulatory body for educational progress in this country, through an official statement, determined the closure of schools and educational centers nationwide due to the spread of COVID-19 in the region, subsequently, the *Aprende en Casa* program (Learn at Home) was implemented to continue established educational curriculum.

Aprende en Casa connected students to their teachers through radio, television (which 92.5% of the population have) and the internet (56.4% of the population). However, the students from rural areas, particularly girls, have fallen behind in educational terms, this is because in Mexico 20.1 million households (56.4% of the national total) have an internet connection and the rate of internet access by urban-rural area presents a difference of 28.9 percentage points, with 76.6% in urban areas and 47.7% in rural areas (Image 1).

Image 1. Internet access in rural and urban areas of Mexico. Source: INEGI 2020.

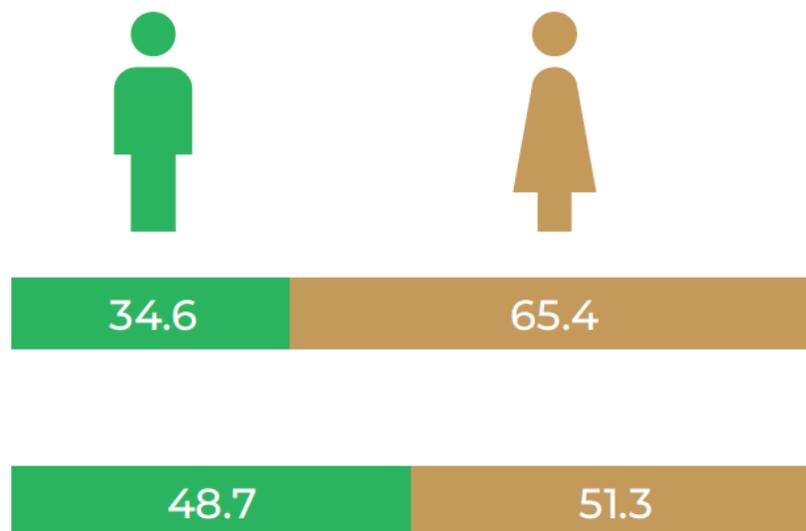


Even with the limitations of the *Aprende en Casa* program, it is to be recognized the effort of the educational authorities of this country and the teachers committed to their students, who continued with their educational work in the most remote and isolated regions of this country. However, the same Secretariat of Public Education (2020) foresees that more than 4.4% of lower secondary students and more than 13% of upper secondary students will not return to the classrooms at the end of the pandemic.

Among the reasons for dropping out of school is the economic crisis that this pandemic has brought or fear of contagion, particularly child marriage and teenage pregnancy, a situation that worsens during home confinement, affecting school-age girls. The interruption of their education brings consequences such as an increase in the number of children they will have and a decrease in income in the future, considering that economic dependence is one of the determining factors to remain in an abusive relationship (UN Women, 2020).

In Mexico, women constitute 51% of the population, equivalent to 65 million in 2020 (INEGI, 2020). It is estimated that two-thirds (66%) of women aged 15 and over have experienced violence at some point in their lives and 44% have experienced violence from their partner (INEGI, 2016). The violence experienced by girls and boys makes them particularly vulnerable by depending on other people to report the violent acts of which they are victims. From April to May 2020, the National System for the Integral Development of the Family (SNDIF) registered a total of 2,215 girls, boys and adolescents experiencing violence, with significant differences by sex and age, and significant variations by state entity (INMUJERES, 2020: 4). (Image 2).

Image 2. Percentage distribution of cases of violence, by age group and sex. April and May 2020. The first row (below) is from 1 to 11 years old. The second row (above) is from 12 to 17 years old.

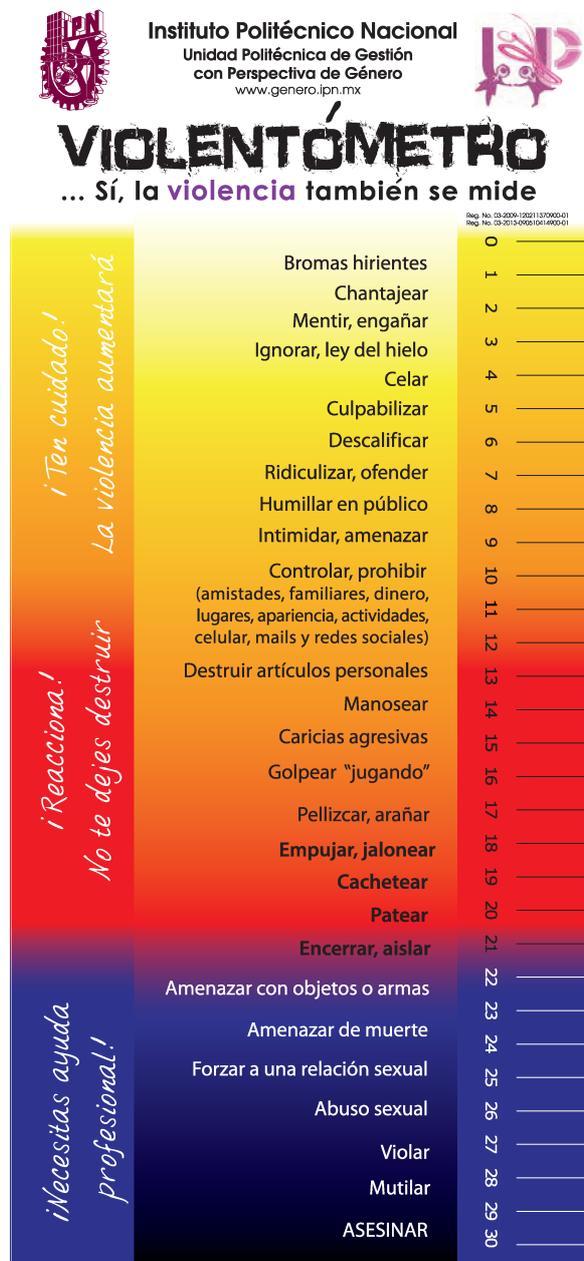


Source: INMUJERES, 2020.

The school could be the place where many of these children who experience domestic violence can relate in a healthier way since they would learn essential life skills, such as how to manage emotions, cope with stress and resolve conflict without violence (UNICEF, 2020: 2).

Among the strategies that the Secretariat of Public Education has implemented to sensitize the population about violent behaviors is the violentómetro (violentometer) (Image 3), which is distributed among upper secondary school students to raise awareness about the indicators of aggressiveness and violence in their relationships, which is an important strategy of the educational authorities to counter this social problem.

Image 3. Violentómetro. Source: IPN, 2012.

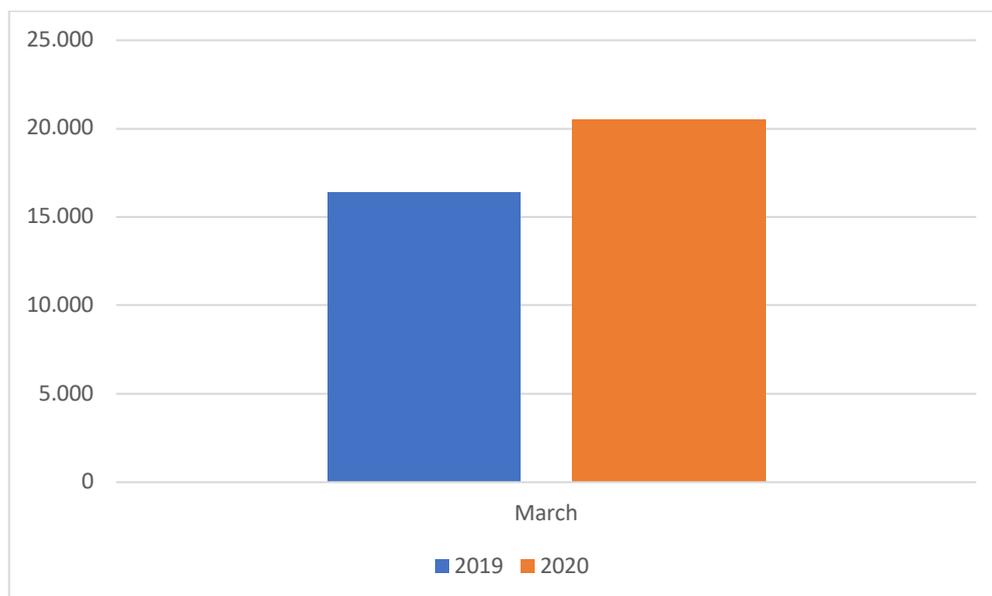


4.Domestic Violence and Education in Yucatan

The state of Yucatan is located in southeastern Mexico. 51.8% of the population living in the region is from the Yucatecan Maya group, whose language, Yucatecan Maya, is the second most spoken indigenous language in basic education (7.1 percent) in Mexico (UNICEF, 2015). In the Mayan communities, gender stereotypes and patriarchal structures prevail, where women are responsible for household chores and taking care of children, and sick and elderly relatives. High levels of marginality and poverty predominate, with low levels of schooling. To put this in context in Yucatan the population's average schooling is 8.8 years (INEGI, 2015) however among the indigenous population in Mexico only 39% of indigenous people have achieved the same levels of education as the non-indigenous population (General Directorate of Indigenous Education, 2017).

In Yucatan, the most frequent types of violence are psychological violence along with physical violence, followed by sexual violence, and then economic violence (Government of the State of Yucatan, 2018). During the confinement, the physical proximity of large families within the home, coupled with economic pressures and uncertainty caused by this pandemic, has exacerbated the tension between family members and child abuse. An indicator of this has been the number of cases of domestic violence reported to the authorities in March 2020 - the month in which the confinement began in Mexico - which amounted dramatically to 20,503 compared to the 16,397 cases reported in 2019 (Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection, 2020) (Chart 2). The real numbers should be higher, considering that only 40% of women who suffer violence seek help of some kind or report the event (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020) for fear of reprisals from the same family members and the community to which they belong.

*Chart 2. Increase in domestic violence during the first month of the lockdown in Mexico.
Source: Own design with data from the Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection, 2020.*



The federal and state governments have established different mechanisms to report abuse, ranging from the 911 number to applications for the cell phone (Government of the state of Yucatan, 2020) considering that the cell phone represents the technology with the highest national presence with 86.5 million users in the country, with women (44.7 million) using it more than men (41.8 million) (INEGI, 2019).

Given the increase in cases of domestic violence in Yucatan and to deepen the physical distancing between the community, the federal government through the Secretariat of the Interior (SEGOB) established the *Cuenta hasta diez* program (Count to ten), which has faced numerous criticisms from the institutions and associations that work in favor of women's rights as it is an insufficient measure in the face of the pandemic of domestic violence that is currently experienced in Mexico.

Another measure implemented by the Yucatan state government is banning sales of alcoholic beverages for certain periods of time, taking into account that the consumption of alcoholic beverages favors social gatherings in the region and in some people encourages violent behavior.

Fieldwork activities confirm the presence of mental and physical health problems related to domestic violence, as is the case of girls who stopped attending school because their parents' continuous fighting affected their school performance and in more serious cases it was found the presence of stress-related skin rashes and prescribed drug consumption.

A Mayan adolescent girl from a rural community shared her experience *"my dad drinks but he doesn't fight, but my cousin is violent, yesterday he broke all the windows and there were screams, he left at dawn and took his wife with him"*. It is worth mentioning that his wife is another underage girl. This was corroborated by the mother of the girl who was part of the conversation.

Another girl commented: *"my sister could not continue studying, there were so many problems between my parents that the doctor advised her to stop attending school for a while, to be quiet at home, after that my parents separated, it is for the best, now we do not see so many problems and we are calmer"*.

The most shocking case was that of another girl who reported: *"I took prescribed drugs that my mother has for the problems she has with my father. I swallowed them and they had to take me to the hospital."* Considering that domestic violence is increasing, it is necessary to establish strategies that support families to feel safe at home and prevent these situations.

5. Discussion

The origins of domestic violence are related to gender inequality, childhood emotional abuse and neglect, frequent arguing with a partner, depression, and gender norms that support men's use of violence. (Dartnall et al., 2020), factors that have been found in the region.

One of the characteristics of these rural populations is the presence of support networks among women to face adversities (Osorio, 2017), due to this fact, it is necessary to make use of these connections to help family members who find themselves facing domestic violence, considering that it is necessary to recognize, decide and act.

As for *recognizing*, the social context of these communities makes it difficult to identify behaviors that are not acceptable, such as offenses, yelling, name-calling,

humiliation and in some cases, physical aggression, behaviors identified in the violentometer distributed by the Secretariat Public Education as signs of violence.

As for *deciding*, a person cannot decide, if there are no options, that is why education is so important and above all, that girls educate themselves so that they can recognize what is acceptable and what is not living in society. If a girl grows up in a violent context, her reference is her home, it is what she knows and therefore normalizes it, and possibly replicates it losing her dignity in the process. School attendance will allow girls to foster healthier, more respectful relationships and to have more information to decide on their own how they will relate to others.

As for *acting*. Currently, with the health crisis, shelters for abused women in Mexico are at the limit of their capacity, therefore, if a woman with her children decides to report her husband for violent behavior, she will most likely return home to face the consequences of her complaint with his perpetrator.

There are valuable initiatives in other countries, for example, in Italy, when reporting domestic abuse to the authorities, it is the violent person who must leave the home, which allows the victim to continue her life in a familiar environment. However, although the existing reporting mechanisms and other government support schemes, it is necessary to create gender-sensitive social safety nets that allow women to act.

Ending a violent relationship is a process since during the abuse the victim loses self-confidence, which makes it more difficult to leave the situation and change her circumstances, however, extreme events such as the COVID-19 pandemic could push the victim to the limit which could facilitate the breakup of an abusive relationship (Kaukinen, 2020).

6. Conclusions

It is a fact that the life of human beings throughout the world has been affected by this pandemic, which has caused a great crisis worldwide. This experience should be useful both for civil society, as well as the government and the private sector, to take improved measures in the face of increasing domestic violence in Mexican homes. Preventive measures should promote equal relationships between men and women where respect prevails, encouraging -as the Mexican educational system has been doing- supportive behaviors that include the sharing of household responsibilities and the care of children equitably to facilitate the well-being of Mexican women.

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