

# GENDER, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.

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## ABSTRACT

Social justice is defined in the paper as fairness (or righteousness) in dealing with one another for the good of the whole body. Development is seen as a change for the better measured in terms of economic productivity, technological and industrial advancement, political stability, etc. The paper argues that there is a strict entailment relationship between social justice and sustainable development. Linking these two concepts to the question of the gender equation is the Weakest-Link Principle, which stipulates that the measure of development of any nation ought to be taken from its least developed sector or unit. Thus, in dealing with development issues, justice is fairness to everyone (or righteousness) for the good of the whole body demands respect for the dignity and inestimable worth of all men and women; and that any inequalities of treatment on the basis of gender be guided by the Weakest-Link Principle and the good of the whole body.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender, Social Justice and Development.

“Justice develops a nation...”  
(Paraphrase of Holy Bible, Proverbs 14:43).

## INTRODUCTION

The thesis of this paper is in two parts: the first part argues that there is a strict entailment relationship between social justice and sustainable development; and the second part maintains that there can be no social justice where any section of the people's population is discriminated against or unjustly treated. This second part of the thesis may sound like a tautology, but in fact it is not. We intend to examine the question of what constitutes just treatment in the general context of the gender issue; that is, what should constitute the just or fair treatment of women which is a very highly controversial matter. Our thesis will argue that any and every discriminatory treatment that is allowed must be done so only on the ground that it aids the development of the whole society. For example, in assigning admission quotas to universities, candidates from educationally disadvantaged areas are supposed to be given a certain preference.

The two parts of the thesis will be tied together under a general rubric, which we call the *Weakest-Link Principle*. The principle as a common English adage, says that a chain is as strong as its weakest link. Translated into the terms of our discourse in this paper, the principle

maintains that the measure of sustainable development of a nation is to be taken, not from

the “Ikoyi” and the “Abuja” and the express ways of the nation, but from the least developed hamlet and community, those places that Nzimiro has cynically referred to as “government rejected area (GRAs)” (Nzimiro, 1985, p.xix). It follows also from the same principle that if everybody's contribution and participation in the development process are significant, then the measure of the success of that effort is to be taken, not from the millionaires and industrialists in the society but from the least advantaged members of that society.

This paper is not a research paper in the social science sense of a field study report replete with data and statistics. Rather it is a conceptual paper, which tries to establish logical relationships among terms that feature in this discourse. Accordingly it might be helpful to examine some of the concepts before we go into the body of the paper.

*Justice* is a quality that is found in certain relationships among human beings. While in some sense the quality may characterize an individual, it is best seen in inter-human relationships. Where it is present, the parties experiencing it also share a sense of satisfaction and belonging; whereas where it is absent, there are bound to be disaffection, dissatisfaction, grumbling, instability and other signs of social malaise. The first part of this paper will be

devoted to examining the nature of justice in fuller detail.

By *Gender*, we shall be referring to the *fact* of being born as either a man or woman. That is to say, masculinity and femininity are gender roles. Feminists and women liberationists have fought ostensibly against the marginalisation of women and the indignities, which have been meted out to the female sex. In doing so, the extremists among them have advocated the discarding of feminine symbols, such as the bra and even the typical feminine posture while urinating; and the rejection of specifically feminine roles, such as motherhood. What they cannot deny is the *fact* that some are born males and others females. Thus nature herself imposes the gender roles of masculinity and femininity. Whether on the basis of physiology, intelligence and hormonal differences, society is justified to treat men and women unequally, and whether any such unequal treatment amounts to an unjust treatment, is a subject which has generated a lot of controversy. We shall consider some of these controversies in the third section of this paper, which deals with the gender factor in social justice; and we shall insist that any discrimination on the basis of gender must be guided by justice and be regulated by the Weakest-Link Principle.

Then there is finally the key concept round which the paper revolves, namely *development*. Ordinarily the word "development" could mean a change for the better or for the worse. But when the word is used today, particularly in economic discourses, it tends to have only positive connotations whereby it is understood as a change from a less desirable to a more desirable condition. Not only in the field of economics but also in those of education, science and technology has the word "development" acquired this favorable connotation. It thus functions like the word 'moral': whereas initially the word 'moral' could mean either good or bad conduct, nowadays when persons speak of a behavior as being "moral", they signal approbation of such behaviors.

Development has generally been measured in terms of economic productivity, high standards of living, technological and industrial advancement, and political stability, among other things. By "sustainable development" we shall refer in this paper to the type of development, which has a long term in view; can perpetuate itself because, among other things, its structures and resources are indigenous; is wholistic and, therefore, seeks the involvement and participation of its entire population. Sustainable development would, among other things encourage the full

participation of all the citizens in the developmental effort; and draw upon the talents and potentials of all sectors. Obviously development cannot be sustainable if it marginalizes any section of the population; or if it depends on what outsiders can do for their needing development. Emphasis on sustainable development would be on local resources and ingenuity, and the full participation of all sectors of the productive economy. Sustainable development would be worlds apart from political showcase projects and grandiose schemes, which actually engender maldevelopment; but it would include any schemes that encourage the impoverished and marginalized rural communities to become self-sustaining and ultimately self-sufficient.

## THE NATURE OF JUSTICE

When justice is mentioned, most persons today are likely to think of the courts of law. But justice in terms of what the courts dispense is only a partial conception of the notion that in the English language is translated as justice. The Greek equivalent, *dikaioσύνη*, was also and perhaps better translated as "righteousness", rather than simply "justice". Righteousness was the singular virtue, which regulated all the relationships within the state – social, moral, and economic. The *dikaios* or righteous man was, accordingly, the upright and just person, observant of the laws of God and man, whether it was in his private life or public capacity.

A detailed study of the nature of justice is not possible here; but we need to mention several of the best-known analysis of justice, starting with Plato, the Greek philosopher. Plato captured something of this all-pervasive sense of justice when he treated justice, not as a virtue characteristic of any particular class in the state, but as marking the relationship among the different classes in the republic. Plato devoted the whole of his book, *The Republic*, to the study of justice. Ostensibly the purpose in writing the book was to prove that justice is its own reward; or in the words of one of the interlocutors named Glaucon, that "the life of the just man is more profitable" than that of an unjust man. This, if proven, would contradict a view, which was popular then and is still popular today; namely, that any man who possessed the mysterious, supernatural powers bestowed by the magic ring of Gyges, who yet refused to act unjustly or to rob his fellowmen would be considered the most miserable and foolish of all men (Plato Book 11, pp.359-360).

In the end, Plato did **not appear** anywhere to prove his thesis. Rather he **fell back** on a plea which should be familiar to **modern church-goers**; namely, that "for the **just man**, though he live in poverty, in disease, or in other seeming evil, these things will in the **end** work out well for him either in life or **after death**. For surely the gods do not neglect him who will **bestir** himself to become just, and by the **practice** of virtue to make himself as like **God as man may**" (Bk 8, p.612).

What vitiates Plato's theory of justice here is that men cannot see the rewards awaiting them at the hands of God or the gods for every act of justice or injustice; and where the rewards come at all, they are not immediate. And so tyrants and **Machiavellian** princes all over the world, and the **vast majority** of men still find the gains from being **unjust** too tempting to resist. This renders Plato's **proof** of his thesis at best a special pleading; namely, that although the just man may suffer here, he will be rewarded later in heaven.

Aristotle, Plato's disciple and successor, did not fare any better in his treatment of justice than did his master. He devoted the fifth book of his *Nicomachean Ethics* to the study of justice. Although he was more down-to-earth in his consideration of partial justice than Plato was, still it appeared as if the intoxication of his privileged social position prevented him from giving a full account of justice as *dikaosyne*, righteousness. Thus, whereas he realized that in justice, every virtue is summed up, he sought to predicate his general theory of justice on the foundation of deserts. Yet he was not sure or definite on what constitutes deserts: birth, wealth or excellence? The definitive statement that Aristotle made is contained in his oft-quoted passage: "If the persons are not equal, their shares will not be equal; but this is the source of quarrels and recriminations, when equals have and are awarded unequal or unequals equal shares" (Aristotle, 1962, Bk V: 3).

The problem of Aristotle was that of deciding what constitutes the basis for equal or unequal treatment. That is, granted that justice consists in treating equals equally, what enables us to decide that two persons are or are not equal? This question will occupy much of our attention when we come to examine the gender issue later on. That Aristotle had no basis, which could, in fact, be considered just or righteous, is shown in his *Politics*, where he not only accepted slavery as an accomplished thing of his time, but also sought to provide a philosophical justification for it.

Thus, the modern liberal mind is shocked

to find that Aristotle thought that there were certain persons who, from the hour of their birth, were marked out for subjection, while others were marked out to rule. Aristotle had, in fact, gone on to say: "And indeed the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different, for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life ... It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right" (Aristotle, 1963, Bk 1:3).

The fact that there are unjust structures, conditions, and institutions, which make it possible for some people to enslave other persons, we cannot deny. But to say that there are persons who are born slaves and for whom slavery is expedient and right is downright inhuman. Insofar as we recognize the dignity of persons inherent in every human being; and insofar as no treatment of persons can be just and righteous which fails to take into account this inherent dignity, Aristotle could not have developed a valid theory of justice.

Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679) had a view of justice proposed in his *Leviathan*, which at best may be regarded as incipient. Since his major concern was to lay out the powers of the Commonwealth, Hobbes immediately restricted his conception of justice to the keeping of covenants regarding property. Thus, he said, "justice is the constant will of giving to every man his own. And therefore where there is no own, that is no propriety, there is no injustice" (1965, p.74). Surprisingly, Hobbes did not appear to realize that even in dealing with what is one's "own", he was touching on fundamental issues which go beyond external properties; for example, life itself. Surely justice applies to men as such, and not as members of a commonwealth. The recognition of the right to life which belongs to every human being; the recognition of the inherent dignity of every person, and the safeguarding of that dignity form part of what it means to be just or righteous.

Hobbes appeared to recognize this only dimly and grudgingly when he stated variously that injustice is similar to what the scholastics in their disputations called "absurdity", that justice is accordingly a rule of reason, since to say that a man is just is simply to say that his "manners" conform to reason. If justice is a rule of reason, and to do an injustice is analogous to committing a logical absurdity, then it would certainly suggest that justice is, above all else, the single **virtue** which sustains human life and relationships; and that to perpetuate an injustice is to **undermine the**

very foundations on which any community life could be erected.

We shall skip over the ages, and consider what is the most recent and possibly the most celebrated view of justice. This is contained in John Rawls' very famous work, *A Theory of Justice*. To begin with, Rawls has two conceptions of justice running side by side: a conception of formal justice and another of substantive justice. Formal justice, according to Rawls (1971, p.58), may be roughly considered as the "impartial and consistent administration of laws and institutions". And Rawls does well to recognize that claims of formal justice would have to depend on and derive their validity from the provisions of substantive justice. If, for example, some members of a society are marked out *ab initio* for subjugation, such as in racist or slave-holding systems, then no amount of consistent administration of the iniquitous laws of such system is going to render them just polities.

It is with the conception of substantive justice, however that, Rawls has many problems. One of the basic, fundamental principles, which inform his substantive justice, is what he calls justice as *fairness*. Justice as fairness is not a postulate; rather it presupposes a prior principle, that of the "initial equality" of the parties engaged in social cooperation. Now Rawls confesses that this "original position of equality ... is understood as a purely hypothetical situation characterized so as to lead to a certain conception of justice" (1971, p.12). If the confession that the "initial equality" provision is a purely hypothetical situation is meant to forestall any objections that may be raised against the utopic nature of the initial equality, then we may consider the objection silenced. But in that case the theory of justice built on this provision becomes vacuous. For a condition of initial equality of persons in social cooperation is a myth, and nothing more than a myth.

The principle of fraternity, apart from being one more of the many ad hoc principles, which Rawls introduces in order to bolster his theory, is another myth. This is the idea that those who are advantaged will not want to maximize the sum of their advantages unless this will accrue to the benefit of the others who are less well off. This may well work in a family, where ideally members care for one another, and would not want to maximize the sum of their advantages over other members. But this is certainly far from being the case in the larger society where no such fraternal sentiments are felt.

John Rawl's work is very important in the

study of justice; but given his many provisions that the situations are hypothetical and not historically valid; and given his many ad hoc principles introduced along the line to bolster the theory, one wonders how well his theory of justice would measure against the hard social and political realities which provide the environment for the practice of social justice.

As we can see from the foregone, justice is a rather difficult concept to delineate. None of the theories of justice by some of the most renowned philosophers whom we considered appeared to be so complete as to leave no loopholes. But we may settle for fairness in *dealing with one another for the sake of promoting the good of the whole body* as being the minimal content of what we call social justice.

The reason we stipulate this minimal content for social justice will become clearer as we attempt to grapple with the gender issue as it confronts developmental situations. But provisionally we might say that if persons who are in the position to negotiate justice really put the good of the body first – whether that body is the individual insofar as we can speak of the individual doing justice to himself; or whether the body is the smallest social unit, viz, the family; or the larger society in the body politic – then more than half the problem with justice and development would be solved. For instance, it seems that thinking of the over-all good of, say, a nation, whether one was planning for development or allocation of resources, would take care of both the matter of substantive justice as well as that of formal justice. And our reason for selecting *fairness* is that rather than make it one of the fundamental principles of justice, as does Rawls, we regard it as a consummation of the virtues in dealing with other persons; which is what the Greeks called *righteousness*. In that sense it is more than a fundamental principle: it is the embodiment of justice itself.

#### **JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN ENTAILMENT RELATIONSHIP**

In this section of the paper, we shall argue that there is an entailment relationship between social justice and sustainable development as defined in this paper. In other words, you cannot have sustainable development where there is no social justice. You may have social justice but no development of any kind. For example, we can imagine a people who are very righteous or just. If, however, they are impoverished or marginalized (by external forces, for instance) then they will not develop much because they can

only share what they have (*non dat quod non habet*). So, whereas social justice is not sufficient for sustainable development, it is certainly necessary for it. To prove this claim that sustainable development entails the prevalence of social justice is the burden of what follows.

To begin with, the African heads of state and government in their 1981 Lagos Plan of Action, as cited in Frances Stewart et al. (1992, p. 7), defined their long-run development objectives to include:

- (1) The alleviation of mass poverty and improvement in the standard of living of the people;
- (2) Self-sustained development; and
- (3) National and regional self-reliance.

The primary aim of it all was conceived of as "sustainable economic growth combined with social justice". Again, the Federal Republic of Nigeria lists in her third Five-year Development plan the aims of the Plan to include, inter alia, "a just and egalitarian society", "a land of bright and full opportunities for all its citizens ..." (Federal Government Printer 1978).

The role assigned to justice in both plans should not be missed. But the question is: why is justice, or specifically social justice, implicated in the envisaged long-run development? Firstly, the realizations of the objective of alleviation of mass poverty and the improvements in the standards of living of the people must mean that the poorest sector of the economy and the remotest areas of the society must be touched by every development effort, or else development will not be maximized. In this sense, the measure of success of development efforts must be gauged from the least developed portions of the society where there is large room for improvement and this precisely is where the principle of fairness (or righteousness) is implicated. The persons who sit in the centers of administration and take decisions concerning development, the distribution of amenities, the allocation of resources, etc., cannot be said to take a fair decision so long as the sprawling rural areas continue to be neglected, or the voiceless majority of citizens have no one to speak for them. Such decisions would not be made in fairness to these neglected areas, nor would it be taken with the good of the whole body in view. Stewart et al in the work already cited see any self-sustained and meaningful development as entailing "comprehensive access of the population as a whole to basic needs including basic health care, basic education, food, water and sanitation".

Secondly, long-run development calls for

the full participation of everybody in productive activities. This means the provision of opportunities for people to be gainfully employed and adequately remunerated. Failure to provide opportunities for people to work is to raise up vast armies of unemployed people; which can be very dangerous for the health of a society, compelling a people to continue to be dependent on what others dole out to them. Elsewhere we argued that meaningful development cannot come to a people through "dole outs" (Etuk, 1996). For people to work at less than adequate remuneration (defining "adequate" to mean sufficient to ensure a decent standard of living) would violate the criterion of fairness. Alternatively, for anyone who fails to work to expect to be fed, housed and clothed at the expense of others would be grossly unfair; for according to the principle of righteousness, anyone who does not work should not eat. So this calls for full participation of the entire labour force in all productive sectors of the economy.

Thirdly anyone can readily see the connection between sustainable or long-run development and stability in the state. It is a truism that when there is stability there can be no development of any sort, short-run or long-run. Similarly there is a strict connection or entailment relationship between justice and stability; or, perhaps, we should say that the connection is even stricter between their corresponding opposing terms. That is to say, injustice in the body politic is certain to produce instability. This is an invariant relationship in the sense that an individual or group who is treated unjustly has the ability, unlike an animal, to know that he/it is being treated unjustly; and once that knowledge has been aroused in the unjustly-treated, the relationship with the purveyor of injustice can never be the same again.

The characteristics of an instable polity are easily delineated; and they include: frequent and violent changes of government; turbulent and/or rigged elections; a collapsing economy or at any rate an economy in which some are filthy rich while the majority are wallowing in abject poverty; massive unemployment; the break-down of law and order which renders life and property unsafe; forceful suppression of dissenting or critical opinions; and religious intolerance in any form or guise. We do not have to show how each of these indices of instability is necessarily linked to particular acts of injustice. What can be asserted without controversy is that injustice necessarily injures social relations and generates those factors which produce instability. If a just

action is the logical action in any situation, even as Thomas Hobbes insisted that justice is a rule of reason whereas injustice is an absurdity (Hobbes 1965, pp.68, 76,77); if it is injustice rather than justice which always requires a defense or rationalization, then injustice is illogical and a contradiction of reason. Furthermore if Immanuel Kant is correct in defining justice as the aggregate of those conditions under which the will of one person can be conjoined with the will of another in accordance with a universal law of freedom (Kant, 1978, p.34), then an act of injustice is a disjoining of the wills; hence, a destabilization, a contradiction. And just as human beings do not acquiesce in illogicality or contradictions, they do not acquiesce in injustice.

With this argument concluded, we can now go on to examine the gender factor in social justice. The question we shall consider is this: given that social justice is a *sine qua non* for sustainable development, how can the gender equation be worked out to guarantee social justice in, say, our nation?

## THE GENDER FACTOR IN SOCIAL JUSTICE

Many writers who have turned their attention to the gender issue agree that women everywhere appear not to be given full opportunity to contribute their quota to the development process. Commenting on the necessity for everyone to participate in development in order to increase the equity and the efficiency of the patterns of development, Stewart et al. (1992, p. 35) note that "women have been largely excluded from political and economic decision-making, despite their critical role in the economy and society". Feminists agree largely with this assessment, as Mappes and Zembaty (1982, p.120) point out:

Contemporary feminists...condemn social practices which discriminate against women. They demand a sexually egalitarian society, rejecting as sexist any society whose education, political, business, and social institutions systematically accord unequal treatment to the sexes.

Now before we proceed to examine the premise on which the feminist case is built, two conclusions should be noted viz; one, that social justice is necessary for sustainable development; and, two, that justice is summed up in fairness to everybody for the good of the whole. Given this

understanding of justice as righteousness (*dikaosyne*), would sexual egalitarianism fulfill the requirements of justice as fairness to everybody; or would some consideration of fairness demand that there be some discriminatory treatment with respect to the genders in order to enhance the good and development of the whole? This is the crux of the matter.

The problem now facing development theory and us congeals into two, one, what would the equal (or egalitarian) treatment of men and women consist in? Two, would such treatment of men and women be fair to either or both sexes, or should we recognize the fact of any inherent differences in the pooling of resources for development?

One way of resolving the problem of equal treatment of men and women is to stipulate that men and women be treated equally in all cases except where the difference between men and women as such can be shown to be relevant to any difference in the treatment given to them. But no sooner is this said than those who would insist on the unequal treatment of men and women point out that the sex of an individual is, in fact, a relevant factor when the capacity of that individual to perform certain tasks is being considered; that differences in sex are believed to be correlated with psychological differences; such as cognitive capacity and emotional make-up; and that "some of the unequal treatment accorded women is in keeping with the principle of equality because women by their very nature are unequal to men in many relevant ways" (Mappes et al., 1982, p. 121). Steven Goldberg, writing on "The Inevitability of Patriarchy", argues that there is a natural difference between the sexes, a hormonal difference, which makes a male-dominated society inevitable. This is because the hormonal difference causes males on the whole to be more aggressive than females; and their greater aggressiveness assures male domination of the high-status roles in the society. (Mappes et al., 1982, p. 136). Steven Goldberg's thesis, in short, is that biological inequalities render social inequalities inevitable.

The argument of feminists represented by such writers as Simone de Beauvoir and Sheila Rowbotham is that gender roles are socially conditioned. Simone de Beauvoir in one of her over-enthusiastic feminist utterances had said: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society" (1969, p. 220). According to Rowbotham (1977, p. 31), girls are taught to hold

themselves in, to refrain from competing against boys, and become "feminine". Steven Goldberg in rebutting this argument insists that it isn't socialization, in fact, but *biological reality*; that if girls were not socialized the way they are, then females would be doomed to lifetime of failure in competition with men (1982, p.139). Thus, to treat women on equality with men would be unfair to the women.

We think that the reality of biology, giving rise to physiological and hormonal differences, is well established and cannot be doubted. How feminists get to deny this is not clear logically. From our position, it would seem that justice as *fairness* to all or righteousness would dictate that, in the first place, the human dignity and inestimable worth inherent in every human being, male and female, be recognized and upheld; and thereafter any inherent differences should be recognized too. Secondly, the principle of fairness and the good of the whole body would further provide that the weak or the disadvantaged, whether physically or psychologically, must be encouraged and strengthened, bearing in mind the weakest-link principle; i.e., that a body will be as strong as its weakest member.

Translated into the questions of the gender equation and our need for sustainable development, Nigerian women are not too vocal in claiming equality with their men folk. She earns equal pay for equal job in the labour market; and although Nigerian employers of labour do not have to declare that they are "equal opportunity employers", women are not discriminated against where they would be otherwise qualified for jobs. The principle of fairness to everyone demands that any remaining areas and vestiges of unfair discrimination be eliminated forthwith. For example, Stuart Nagel (1944, p. 80) has shown that although the legal system, for instance, in Nigeria, is normally based on gender equality, some laws in fact disadvantage women in starting and operating their own businesses. Nagel says that owing to the lack of title deeds and other tangible securities, women do not usually qualify for bank loans. Additionally, banks and other finance houses have a negative attitude towards women borrowers. All of this goes on in spite of the established fact that women are excellent entrepreneurs if they have appropriate opportunities to start and operate their own businesses.

Now anyone – government, institutions, or individuals – who in thinking development thinks for the good of the whole would realize that so long as a vast sector of the productive and reproductive forces in a nation is permanently

handicapped, be it by laws or by negative attitudes, then the whole nation is being handicapped. The crucial importance of developing our human resources cannot be gainsaid, as emphasized by Stewart et al. (1992, pp. 33-34).

African economies are potentially rich in human resources; yet people are relatively neglected, badly educated and in poor health with their capacities frequently underused.

The consequence is low labour productivity and lack of competitiveness compared with Countries where human resources are more fully developed and better used.

In Nigeria, women constitute a vast segment of these human resources, and so they must be encouraged, challenged, supported, and offered every opportunity, not in a patronizing way, but as full members of the population to contribute their quota to the development process. Attitudes and cultural practices, which inhibit their initiative, creativity and full participation, must be removed.

Sometimes the gender equation debate assumes an ironic twist: men are now arguing for "male liberation". Herb Goldberg, a clinical psychologist and a strong advocate of male liberation, argues that the traditional gender roles

whereby men have been held up as exerting "control and power" over women are destructive of men; that men themselves ought to insist, as a matter of their self-interest, that women must take the transition to become "total persons". Herb Goldberg maintains that "the growth of men depends on the growth of women" (1982, p. 150). Goldberg says man's so-called domination has put him under endless pressure because it has been contingent on women remaining a child.

Feminists may not like the harsh way herb Goldberg puts it: but he could be understood as expressing differently the contention of this paper; viz., that women must be freed to be full participants in all development efforts; that they must be enabled to become autonomous members of the community and make their full contribution for the good of the whole body. This certainly is a demand of fairness as *righteousness*, for the purpose of enhancing sustainable development.

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