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THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY
IN THE FIELD OF AGEING

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Introduction

With declining mortality and improving health and hygiene, more people are living longer. This, coupled with declining fertility, changes the structure of population. In 1950 there were 200 million persons 60 years and older, by 2025 the population of elderly (60 years plus) will have grown by a factor of six, to 1.2 billion and the "old" old (80 years plus) by a factor of ten, from 13 million in 1950 to 137 million in 2025.¹

The ageing process varies according to many different factors, such as lifestyle, health or family status, and it cannot be measured only by chronological age. Poverty and overburden from work could cause the terms of "exhausted" and "old" to be synonymous. The **International Plan of Action on Ageing** tells: "Ageing is a life-long process and should be recognized as such".² As the elderly are enabled to be more active, self-reliant, self-determining and contributing members of society, they will become healthier and less isolated and economically dependant. Social isolation of the elderly, be it due to decreased economic capacity, age segregated institutions, death of spouse and friends, disintegrating family patterns or some combination of factors, is an element of ageing that is intimately interrelated with psychological and physical wellbeing.

A major concern of the **International Plan of Action on Ageing** is that older people receive basic necessities: income, food, housing and health care. These basic necessities are not guaranteed to older people who are unable to work in many less

¹ United Nations Department of Public Information, The United Nations and Ageing. International day for the Elderly: 1 October 1991.

² Women 2000, No 3, 1991, p.3. (Secondary source)

developed countries. Even in prosperous countries, the limited amount of remuneration covered by the pension schemes let many older people become destitute and abandoned, as it is not sufficient for self-support. The ageing of populations in underdeveloped countries is facing two critical facts: a weak institutional infrastructure for receiving the gradually increasing number of the elderly, and the uncertainty about whether the family will be able to continue providing care for its elderly in the future. A dilemma exists: the choice between using the scarce resources to provide basic services for the whole population or special services for the elderly. Ageing is progressing while basic developmental problems such as education, health and sanitation or control of environment await solutions. The conflict on resource allocation becomes inevitable.

Coupled to the fact that the traditional Arab family is experiencing a transformation due to new economic and social conditions, is ofcourse the changing status for women in the region. The woman is usually the caregiver in the home, whether to children or elderly in need of care. However, increasing female participation in the labourmarket is changing this pattern.

Arab Family

Family is important to all. We are shaped by it, favorably and unfavorably. More often than not, people identify themselves by their own families, which shows how deep those roots are. Some American historians claim that there is no such thing as a normative or universal family. The family is a human invention, a social creation, a set of relationships that change over time with economic, political and social development.³

³ Swerdlow A., Bridenthal R., Kelly J. and Vine P., Families in Flux. New York 1989.

In Arab culture, the traditional family is usually considered to be the ideal social institution for meeting the fundamental needs of the elderly. However, the family pattern in the Arab countries is changing, due to new economic and social conditions, such as modernization, urbanization, adaptation of new technology, consumption patterns in oil producing and non-producing countries etc. The extended structure is giving way to the nuclear. Qatar census of 1986, shows that the number of nuclear families were in slight majority with 56 per cent and single households accounted for 11 per cent. In 1986, nuclear families accounted for 66.08 per cent of total families in Egypt; also in rural areas in Egypt nuclear families were in majority (61.57 per cent).⁴ The number of nuclear families in Kuwait in 1985, was 65.15 per cent of total families; also there was a majority of 61.29 per cent of nuclear families in rural areas.⁵ Nuclear families in Jordan account for 71 per cent. Households in large cities are more likely to be nuclear, while in rural areas the household tend to be either nuclear or consist of ever-married relatives.⁶ However, the censuses do not state clearly whether the households with blood related family ties live together in the same building, for example one house is occupied by parents on groundfloor, one son with family on first floor, second son on second floor etc, still all families forming separate households. This situation could still be considered a modified form of extended family.

There are few studies done on the status of the family in the ESCWA region. Therefore, the studies referred to in the text date

⁴ Egypt National Census, 1986. (Definition of nuclear family is a couple without children or a couple with unmarried children).

⁵ Kuwait National Census, 1985. (Definition of nuclear family is a couple without children or a couple with unmarried children).

⁶ Department of Statistics, Ministry of Health, Demographics and Health Surveys and IRD/Macro International Inc. Jordan Population and Family Health Survey 1990

back to the 1970's. However, the results from these studies can give an idea to what the status of the family is today. The number of nuclear families have probably increased in the last twenty years due to increased labour migration to cities and between countries in the region. A study of two districts in Amman, Al-Ashrafiyah and Al-Mahatta, conducted by the United Nations Development Program in 1972, showed that nuclear families account for 67 per cent of the families at Al-Mahatta and 72 per cent of families at Al-Ashrafiyah⁷. A study conducted in Kuwait 1981 indicated that the nuclear family accounted for 59 per cent of the total families in the survey, while extended families do not exceed 17 per cent.⁸ A study on Lebanese society in 1970 also explains that the nuclear family is a dominant pattern not only in cities but also in rural areas.⁹ A study conducted in Syria in 1973 showed that the majority of families in cities (83.60 per cent) were nuclear families. Even in rural areas the figure was high (62.40 per cent). The study also showed a slight variation (5-6 per cent) by social status only in big cities and rural areas in favour of middle class families. No difference existed in small cities.¹⁰ However, the extended family is still predominant. Naturally, in the process of society's change from a traditional to a modern one, the family loses some of its functions and traditional role. Social institutions are arising, each withdrawing from the family some function which had been self-explanatory in its traditional form.

⁷ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Impact of Social and Economic Changes on the Arab Family: An Exploratory Study, 1992.

⁸ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Contribution to Survey of Economic and Social Development in the ESCWA Region, 1992.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Syrian Arab Republic, Office of the Prime Minister, Central Bureau of Statistics, Family Size and Family Health 1973, Damascus 1979.

Opinions part where it concerns the strong family ties among Arab families. According to a study on social consequences of labour migration on families in Jordan, in regard to family ties with the extended family, labour migration tend to reduce the traditional ties with the extended family.¹¹ Another study made by Sarhan in 1975 on Palestinian residents in Kuwait indicates that a great majority of the sample did not break their relations with relatives outside Kuwait.¹² However, family relationship in Arab societies still seems to retain strong ties among its members. Even in nuclear families blood relationships between independent nuclear units and other relatives are still maintained and the network of family ties is still strong.

In the traditional extended family, reciprocal obligations felt by family members for one another arise from strong kinship bonds. Elderly enjoy high prestige as guardians of village lore and morality, and as persons standing nearest to departed ancestors. As long as the elderly were physically able, they contributed to productive work in farming and in the household. In return the elderly were given shelter, food, financial support and if needed physical care. Within the traditional extended family, the elderly enjoyed a sense of belonging, as well as emotional and physical security. Many factors are undermining the traditional place of the elderly in the family and community, like new stress on individualism, young people's more independent life-style and the importance placed on knowledge of technology rather than experience. By the twenty first century, it may become common for many elderly persons to have few or even no children to care for them in old age. The fall in the birth rate seems already to have

¹¹ Kamiar M. S. and Ismail H. F. "Family Ties and Economic Stability Concerns of Migrant Labour Families in Jordan", International Migration, Vol XXIX, No. 4, 1991, p. 561-571.

¹² United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Impact of Social and Economic Changes on the Arab Family: An Exploratory Study, 1992.

peaked in the industrial world, and it is now beginning to decrease in the developing countries, including the ESCWA region. Furthermore, the increase in the number of the extreme aged, who may require intensive nursing constitutes a problem to family care. Migration of the young from rural areas to the cities weakens the family support for the elderly left behind. Fertility rates drop in rural as well as urban areas, and the problem of over-concentration of elderly persons without economic support by the younger persons will be more acute in the developing countries.¹³

In comparison to some other societies, the elderly have not yet come to constitute a problem in the family. However, the beginnings of such an attitude is emerging in response to the transformation in the family, in particular with reference to female employment. Many families who could once give social and economic support to their elders, no longer have the resources to do so. Wage earning families do not have the space to house ageing parents, nor do most families any longer need the abilities and skills of older people. Many middle aged people will feel guilt and anguish towards the older generation, in the belief that families somehow should provide the space, time and attention their elderly deserve. Whether in developing or developed countries, a community response seems to be missing.

Existing family related social support for elderly in the ESCWA region

Countries of the ESCWA region differ in the way they provide support to the elderly. In Iraq, a needy family with elderly members can be given a salary with the specification that it is given to the family and not to the individual, in order to strengthen the family as a unit. In Kuwait newly married couples

¹³ This section is heavily depending on The World Ageing Situation, Strategies and Policies, United Nations, 1985.

are given financial aid to continue to care for their elderly parents. Some countries in the ESCWA region have housing policies designed to keep family members together. In Kuwait, for example, housing plans are made as to enable young couples to find housing in the same building as their parents or in the vicinity. Another policy in the region is the use of mass media to make young people aware of Islamic guiding rules concerning solidarity within the family and the duty of caring for the elderly.¹⁴ Jordan has benefits for the survivor of the insured worker even if he dies from a cause other than work.¹⁵

The term "home care" builds on the conviction that social welfare services should try to maintain older persons in their environment for as long as possible. "Home care" is still a service that is being progressively developed in several countries. Bahrain, for example, provides social, health and financial services to the elderly in their own home through a mobile unit belonging to the Developmental and Rehabilitation Home for Children and the Elderly. "Home care" in Kuwait is given by visiting social workers who give guidance to families caring for elderly.¹⁶

However, care of the elderly within the family is not always possible, as with persons without children or relatives, the unmarried and widows. Institutional services may be needed to a certain degree, but the institutions must have strong links to the community. As in Bahrain, for example, residential facilities for the elderly are small individual units, dispersed all over the community in order to keep family and community contact, with the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Social Security Corporation, Rights and Benefits of the Insured Under the Social Security Law, 1988

¹⁶ This section is heavily depending on The World Ageing Situation, Strategies and Policies, United Nations, 1985.

involvement of the residents in the running of the facilities.¹⁷

In spite of the fact that the traditional Arab family is experiencing a transformation, policy makers within the region express a conviction that the family is still a feasible care giver, and can continue this role with the right community support. Lebanon's representative to the World Assembly on Ageing stated that one of the Government's goals is to provide support for the family in order for its members to be able to keep the elderly in the home. A similar statement comes from Qatar's national report, that assistance will be given to the family in order to prevent a breakdown in the traditional family ties.¹⁸

Changing status of Arab women

The changed status of women in the Gulf region came with the discovery of oil. The two major variables that were considered to affect the status of women were education and employment. Today there is an increasing interest in female education within the Arab society. This increase got its starting point in the 1950's. Nevertheless, the proportion of educated males are still higher than educated females due to the cultural values that still gives priority to males especially in rural areas. Also there may be a tendency to educate males rather than females when weighing priorities in low-income households. This situation is also associated with early marriage for girls in the context of values giving priority to marriage over education.¹⁹

As can be seen in Table 1, all selected countries of the ESCWA

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Delvin A. Roy, Saudi Arabian Education: Development Policy. Middle Eastern Studies. Vol 28, No. 3, July 1992, p.477-508.

region except Lebanon have more than 90 per cent illiteracy among women aged 65 years and older. Future older women will have higher enrolment in education. For example, in Bahrain in 1981 the illiteracy rate of females aged 65 years and older was 95.4 per cent, but in the age group 25-44 years, it was down to 41.8 per cent. The same pattern applies also for Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria and United Arab Emirates.

The growth in the education of women naturally opened an opportunity for them to work. Education is not a condition to work, but the two are closely linked. Education is changing peoples values and social attitudes.

Even though illiteracy among young women in Saudi Arabia is almost eradicated, Saudi women in the labour force are still minimal. They are facing many difficulties such as family restrictions, lack of self-transportation, fear of rumors, limited opportunities, lack of child care facilities and lack of economic incentives. The fact that women increasingly have access to education at all levels poses a problem. Denied working opportunity, except in some areas considered appropriate, a higher portion of women remain in school for higher levels of education than do Saudi males. Women are also rather consistently academically outperforming their male counterparts.²⁰

As can be seen in Table 2, the female labour participation of the region has increased. Lebanon has a female labour participation of 27.2 per cent of the total labour force, and as a per centage of men as high as 37.0 per cent. Also Syria has a high per centage of female participation, with 15.4 per cent of the total labour force, and as a per centage of men 18.0 per cent. The

²⁰ Looney Robert E., "Patterns of Human Resource Development in Saudi Arabia", Middle Eastern Studies, Volume 27, No.4, 1991, p. 668-678.

rising cost of clothing, food, housing, schooling, nursing and health care can no longer be met by the husband's income in most countries of the region. This makes mothers seek paying jobs. Now, as ever, married women generally work because they cannot afford not to.

With more and more younger women being gainfully employed outside the home, the role of older women in house keeping and child-care is gaining importance. In the traditional extended family, the upbringing of children is carried out collectively, the collective values govern the behavior of the whole family. The modern nuclear family who seeks the help of grandparents in the upbringing of children does not have the basis of collective values. Grandparents are merely helping with a problem which is not possible to solve in another way. The deficiency of child-care services helping working women is part of the problem. Nurseries to take care of children of working parents, if they exist, are either lacking in supervision by specialized people or they are so costly that only a limited number of families can afford them.²¹ Families that most need the mother's income are the ones least able to pay for the nurseries and centers that are available. Therefore, the above-mentioned solution, "child-care by grand parents", is still considered to be a viable solution for the majority of the population in the ESCWA region.

Future older women will have higher educational standard than those who are old now, and more of them will probably have been in formal employment. This will secure them a better standard of living while they are in active employment, but will, at least in the poor countries of the region, do little to improve their

²¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Impact of Social and Economic Changes on the Arab Family: An Exploratory Study, 1992.

situation in their old age. ²²

In many pre-industrial societies, age empowers women in the family. They become less subject to male authority; they do not need to exhibit the same degree of deference to males or uphold rules in dress and action and they may ignore language taboos and begin to speak more freely and with authority. All this means that older women have more possibility to challenge men in the councils, engage in commerce and trade and collaborate in organizational activities. Industrialization limits older women's power in the family and community. Wise council is no longer highly valued since the young can better manipulate information systems and new technology. Modern media is more interesting than stories from the old days. New technologies strips the old generation of their role, status and income security.²³

Life expectancy for women is higher than for men and not only higher but the difference is slowly increasing. Table 3 shows that the lowest difference between sexes in life expectancy is Oman (2.6 years) and the highest difference (5.0 years) is in United Arab Emirates. In year 2025 highest difference between sexes in life expectancy will be found in Kuwait, Qatar and UAE (6.4 years), while the lowest will be in Yemen (4.3 years). The care-giver in an elderly couple is probably the wife, since women generally live longer than men and are younger than their husbands. When a man is widowed, or the support needed exceeds the capacity of the spouse, an adult daughter usually take over the role as primary care-giver.²⁴

²² Women 2000, No. 3, 1991, p.4.

²³ United Nations, "Older Persons in the Family: Facets of Empowerment", Occasional Paper Series, No.4, 1993, Vienna, 1993.

²⁴ Ibid.

There is a slight but steady rise in the divorce rate in most Arab countries. In the absence of accurate data, it can only be assumed that it is the changes in society which has raised the divorce rate. Important in this situation is the change in women's status as a result of achieved education and employment, which gives her economic independence.²⁵ As can be seen in Table 4, all countries in the ESCWA region have a higher per centage of divorce for women aged 60 plus, than that of men of the same age. In Qatar the number of divorces for women aged 60 plus is 4.1 per cent, compared to 1.5 per cent for men. The reason may be that elderly men normally remarry after a divorce, while the divorced elderly women remain single.

Elderly women are especially vulnerable. They live longer than men, have worked less frequently in the formal sector and suffer more often from long-term chronic impairment. There is a much higher per centage of widowed women than widowed men in the region. As seen in Table 4, widowed women within the age group of 60 years and older in the selected countries of the ESCWA region range from 46.8 per cent in Syrian Arab Republic, to 65.7 per cent in the United Arab Emirates, while widowed men in the same age group range from 3.7 per cent in Bahrain up to 9.9 per cent in Egypt. One reason is higher life expectancy for women. Another reason is that women marry earlier than men. Furthermore widowed men tend to remarry, while women remain alone in most cases. This means that older women probably experience a long period of widowhood in later life. The loss of a spouse means not only loss of socio-economic support, but also loss of companionship and social status, which makes older women vulnerable to poverty and social isolation.

²⁵ Dr. Madiha El Safty, Situation of Families in Western Asia The Arab Family in Transition ; A Sociological Perspective. Paper presented to the "United Nations African and Western Asia Preparatory Meeting for the International Year of the Family", Tunis, 18-22 January 1993.

None of the countries in the region have any special financial security for elderly women.²⁶ The dominance of the single female elderly population (widows) in most countries of the region may effect pattern of family support, bread winning and care, as they are most likely to be financially dependant. As long as sons are the only means for widowed women to receive economic support, how can it be expected that women will accept family planning in the early part of their lives. In Iraq, after the Gulf crisis, the situation is worst for the vulnerable groups like widows , who do not have any personal assets to sell for food and other necessities.²⁷

Governments stress that home-care is more humane for the elderly than institutional care. However, if home-care is not supported by community services, financial support and availability of housing, it may be inhumane in the extreme to place the burden entirely on the care-giver (in many cases a woman) whose primary needs, like leisure, freedom, privacy, sleep and money, are often lost. Caring for elderly people cannot be compared to caring for children, since it involves increasing dependency, time constraints, the caregiver-receiver relationship, and the elderly's degeneration.²⁸

²⁶ Mr. Yehya El Haddad, Ageing in the ESCWA Region. Paper not formally published.

²⁷ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region 1990-91, 1992.

²⁸ United Nations, "Older Persons in the Family: Facets of Empowerment", Occational Paper Series, No.4, 1993, Vienna 1993.

Conclusions and recommendations

The traditional Arab family is going through a transformation, due to new economic and social conditions. Nuclear families are in majority in several of the ESCWA countries. However, the network of family ties is still strong and family related social support for elderly should be considered an important alternative of care for the elderly. Some of the ESCWA countries already have policies striving towards family care like housing policies, "home care" and community integrated residential facilities for the elderly. However, it is necessary to promote support to family care-giving, which includes, information and training on care-giving, counselling, social work, medical training, financial support in the form of housing and rental subsidies for multi-generational families.

The changes in the status of women has changed their traditional role as caretakers of older family members; it is necessary to enable the family as a whole, including its male members, to take over and share the burden of help in and by the family. This means promotion and implementation of flexible labour laws, like for example "flexible working-hours", "job-sharing" or "work at home". There has to be more sharing and cooperation of responsibilities among different family members.

The method of grandparents' bringing up children for working parents is a very innovative alternative as it utilizes the family resources, and guarantees the emotional security of the children. However, it is extremely important that parents and grandparents have a common understanding concerning upbringing of children.

Older persons should remain integrated in society and in order to participate actively and to share their knowledge with younger generations, it is necessary to provide elderly with literacy training, training in new technology and how to adopt traditional

values to new situations.

In order for ageing to be fully understood as a natural process, information, education and communication campaigns on ageing are necessary in order to promote positive images of ageing and ageing as a subject of general social relevance in which everyone participates.

The situation for older women should be examined, since they generally have fewer entitlements than men, while outliving them in most countries. Pension schemes should be extended to cover also housewives and those who have not been in formal employment.

Establishing of interest groups for the elderly should be encouraged. Also promotion of support groups for families with special care-giving needs for elderly, like for example people suffering from senile dementia. Families caring for extremely difficult cases of old age diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease and related neurological disorders, should be given an alternative of state-based institution care.

The importance of mediating structures, such as religious organizations, racial, cultural, neighborhood and other groups should be emphasized. Together with the informal support system of kin, friends and neighbors, they constitute an important informal social network. It is within this informal network that older people have the most frequent interaction and through it are provided a broad base of social care throughout the world.

Finally, as we strive to achieve our goals for social welfare, we should draw on the legacy and the caring traditions of Arab culture, which could be utilized in promoting the role of the family in caring for the elderly.

Table 1

Illiteracy by age and sex, by percentage, in selected countries of the ESCWA region.

	Year	Age	Female	Male
Bahrain	1981	25-44	41.8	19.9
		45-64	82.6	51.7
		65+	95.4	79.8
Jordan	1979	65+	94.5	73.7
Kuwait	1980	25-44	40.8	26.0
		45-59	72.3	39.8
		60+	91.1	65.6
Lebanon	1970	25+	58.6	32.1
		50-59	66.8	35.4
		60+	79.4	53.9
Syria	1970	25-44	82.6	38.5
		45-64	93.3	60.1
		65+	97.5	76.9
United Arab Emirates	1975	25-44	60.8	39.8
		45-64	89.1	60.2
		65+	95.9	85.4

Source: *United Nations, Compendium Statistics and Indicators on the Situation of Women. New York, 1986.*

Table 2

Female participation in labour force 1988-90, in the countries of the ESCWA region.

	Females as a per centage of males	Females as a per centage of total labour force
World	58.0	35.1
All developing countries	52.0	32.5
Bahrain	11.0	10.3
Egypt	12.0	10.9
Iraq	6.0	5.8
Jordan	11.0	9.9
Kuwait	16.0	13.5
Lebanon	37.0	27.2
Oman	9.0	8.1
Qatar	8.0	7.0
Saudi Arabia	8.0	7.1
Syria	18.0	15.4
United Arab Emirates	7.0	6.2
Yemen	15.0	13.1

Source: *United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 1992.*

Table 3

Life expectancy at age "0" years, by sex, in the ESCWA countries, for the period 1985-2025 (years).

	1990 - 1995		2000 - 2005		2010 - 2025	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Bahrain	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Democratic Yemen*	51.8	55.0	56.7	60.2	65.7	70.0
Egypt	61.8	64.5	65.8	69.3	70.3	75.2
Iraq	65.0	67.4	67.9	71.4	71.3	76.5
Jordan	65.9	70.2	68.5	73.3	71.7	77.7
Kuwait	71.1	76.0	72.6	77.9	73.8	80.2
Lebanon	66.6	71.7	69.1	74.6	72.2	78.1
Oman	57.1	59.7	62.5	65.7	68.6	73.5
Qatar	68.1	73.1	70.1	75.7	72.7	79.1
Saudi Arabia	64.1	68.1	67.4	72.0	71.1	76.8
Syria	65.2	69.2	68.0	72.7	71.4	77.2
United Arab Emirates	68.1	73.1	70.1	75.7	72.7	79.1
Yemen Arab Republic*	51.8	55.0	56.7	60.2	65.7	70.0

* On 22 May 1990 Democratic Yemen and Yemen merged to form a single state. Since that date they represented as one member with the name of "Yemen". The data were reported separately in this table as the basic statistics were compiled prior to the merge.

Source: *United Nations, World Demographic Estimates and Projections, 1950-2025.*
New York, 1988.

Table 4

Marital status for the elderly, by sex, in selected ESCWA countries.

	Year	Age	Sex	Divorced	Widowed
Bahrain*	1981	50+	Male	2.2	3.7
			Female	4.6	47.9
			Total	3.1	20.2
Egypt	1976	60+	Male	0.6	9.9
			Female	0.8	63.8
			Total	0.7	37.5
Iraq	1977	60+	Male	0.8	9.6
			Female	1.2	53.4
			Total	1.0	31.8
Jordan	1979	60+	Male	0.6	9.5
			Female	1.3	55.5
			Total	0.9	31.6
Kuwait*	1985	60+	Male	0.9	7.6
			Female	2.7	65.7
			Total	1.8	34.1
Qatar	1986	60+	Male	1.5	4.9
			Female	4.1	55.9
			Total	2.4	23.5
Syrian Arab Republic	1981	60+	Male	0.4	9.0
			Female	0.8	46.8
			Total	0.6	27.3
United Arab Emirates	1975	60+	Male	4.2	9.7
			Female	4.4	65.7
			Total	4.3	33.2

* Nationals and non-nationals.

Source: Calculated by ESCWA from National Censuses.

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