

Waling Multiple Campus Journal  
Vol. 2, No. 1: 1-17, May, 2026  
Research Management Cell (RMC),  
Waling Syangja, Nepal

# Gendered Obstacles in Educational Leadership Among Female Leaders

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## Abstract

*Female leadership in education today has become the subject of attention due to its potentiality to promote inclusive decision-making system, diversity, and innovation. Despite such benefits, females remain underrepresented in leading positions in educational institutions, particularly in the communities reigned by strong patriarchal norms and values such as Nepal. This paper explored the gendered obstacles that hinder women's progression into educational leadership roles and examined how women leaders handled and overcame such challenges. Adopting an interpretivist paradigm, the researcher followed a qualitative narrative inquiry approach collecting data using unstructured interviews to three female head teachers of public secondary schools in Syangja district, Nepal. The findings revealed that women head teachers encountered multiple barriers, including societal skepticism regarding women's authority, gender stereotypes establishing women as soft or emotional, institutional biases in the schools in leadership selection, and challenges in balancing family responsibilities and profession. Despite such challenges, the women head teachers applied several strategies, such as developing plans and policies, involving in continuous professional development, building collaborative leadership, focusing on transparent decision-making procedures, maintaining committee-based management, and creating strong engagement with stakeholders such as teachers, students, parents, and the outer community. The findings remark the need of female leadership for better institutional reforms, gender-inclusive policies, and collaborative leadership atmosphere to ensure equitable opportunities for females in educational leadership in Nepal.*

**Keywords:** barriers, head teachers, gender stereotypes, societal expectation, leadership

## Introduction

In recent ages, the role of females in leadership has gained increasing attention among academic, and corporate fields. Female leadership, not much attentive subject matter in the past, has now been recognized as an essence to fostering diversity in any institution and innovation, and balanced decision-making skills among the leaders. It is perceived of being advantageous to an organization. Female leaders can cause a unique constellation of leadership-related activities, traits, attributes, and behaviors to the workplace that may be beneficial to their organizations (Offermann & Foley, 2020). Eagly, (2007) supports females, more than males, manifest leadership styles associated with effective performance as leaders.

Despite growing awareness and advocacy for female leadership, females remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles in any institution since they face systemic barriers that hinder their full participation in leadership roles. Bass and Bass (2008), Eagly and Sczesny (2009) and Gruber *et al.* (2018) claim that one of the main causes of women's underrepresentation in important roles is the disparity in how men and women emerge as leaders. These gender-based barriers range from work-life balance, societal expectations and gender stereotypes to institutional biases and limited access to mentorship or advancement opportunities (Pageni & Sharma, 2024) causing less representation of females in leadership roles. Women are underrepresented in leadership roles in the higher education field (Beckwith *et al.*, 2016) that creates systemic disadvantages for female leaders in education.

The underrepresentation of women in educational leadership is not simply a matter of numbers; it reflects deeper structural and cultural issues that support gender inequality. Understanding these challenges is essential to developing inclusive leadership frameworks and creating equitable opportunities for all genders in educational settings. Research findings suggest that it is more effective if gender is diverse because it will show and suggest different ideas and be better equipped to address complex challenges and capitalize on diverse perspectives, ultimately leading to more unique, innovative and more effective solutions (Kairys, 2018). Hence, gender equality in educational leadership in recent days has been increasingly recognized not only as a question of justice, but also as essential for enhancing educational quality, responsiveness, and inclusivity. Many female academic leaders emerge promoting equity and fostering inclusive and effective educational environments.

Along with the significant advancements in gender equality over recent decades, persistent disparities remain in the field of educational leadership. With strong support on female leadership, Odhiambo (2011, p. 675) states that 'improving women's participation in leadership roles is an important part of the struggle to improve the freedom, rights and opportunities of all the women worldwide'. However, numerous studies report how gender inequalities in educational institutions still persist hindering institutional prosperity. Among plethora of causes of gender inequality, the masculinized discourse *i.e.* dominating patriarchal norms running within the academy has the main impact around. Savigny (2014) reports that it is due to these hegemonic masculine norms that women academics feel as the 'other' not belonging within academia.

In Nepal, females cover more than half of the population. Despite the remarkable number, females are still significantly under-represented in all sectors, including the higher education sectors. Along with the first provision of inclusive policies for women and other marginalized groups in the Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007, the seed of female leadership in Nepal, is found to have sowed in the field of politics *i.e.* in parliament through quota system. Next the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, 1990 ensured democratic governance alongside a constitutional monarchy creating the first minimum threshold for women candidates, though not being guaranteed for their representation in the House of Representatives (Adhikari, 2025). The then political parties were required to have at least five percent of their candidates as females in elections (Himalaya, 1991). Currently the policy of inclusion to increase female representation in parliament through quotas has been guaranteed by the Constitution of Nepal, 2072. Adhikari, (2025, p.43) states:

Within the legislature, both the House of Representatives and the National Assembly have adopted inclusive policies that ensure specific quotas for women. The House of Representatives mandates that at least one-third of its members from each political party must be women.

Females today are expected to grow up to professional senior leadership roles in educational institutions such as principals, superintendents, and university administrators. Pageni & Sharma, (2024) state 'Bringing more women into leadership roles is key to helping institutions succeed.' Yet, in Nepal, many female leaders are found to hesitate to take up the responsibilities easily despite their capabilities because of many challenges. The existence of a patriarchal culture, social beliefs and gender-based role expectations have created prejudice towards Nepalese women, impacting their

career growth (Langer *et al.*, 2019; Upreti *et al.*, 2020). Many researches have focused on what challenges and barriers women leaders have faced in their professions. The particular gendered obstacles for women leaders to raise in and run the senior leadership role in higher education institutions in Nepal has not been analyzed. Since the causes of women's underrepresentation in Nepal have not been studied, the whole narrative has not been told and women's voices have not been heard, this study aims to analyze the gendered barriers faced by female leaders at higher education institutions by examining their lived experiences. Despite the existence of barriers, some Nepalese women have been successful in finding their way into senior roles in higher education institutions. Thus, this research sets out even to explore the strategies used by successful female leaders in overcoming barriers: the examination of these strategies offers evidence of their practical implications and their effect on overcoming challenges, which may be beneficial for other women as they maneuver their way through obstacles.

#### Research Questions:

- i. What gender barriers hinder women's access to progression in school leadership roles?
- ii. In what ways does gender-based discrimination or stereotyping influence the performance and perception of women leaders in schools?

#### Literature Review

This paper explores the key gender-related barriers that female leaders face in educational leadership, examines the influence on the performance and perception of women leaders in schools, and highlights the need for institutional reforms to foster gender-inclusive leadership environments. For the purpose, this study bases in feminist and sociological theories that plays on how gender impacts upon access to leadership opportunities in educational institutions. Theoretical insights from Liberal Feminism and Gender Role Theory provide the lens through which the challenges faced by female educational leaders are examined. These frameworks assist explain both the institutional, or structural inequalities and cultural stereotypes that influence in the underrepresentation and marginalization of women in educational leadership positions.

Despite the fact of increasing motif of more women, joining the workforce in Nepal, there are still comparatively few women in leadership roles than men as the cause of inequality. Liberal feminism asserts that women and men are inherently equal and should have equal opportunities in all sectors, including education and leadership (Tong, 2014).

The theory focuses on legal equality, policy reform, and equal access to resources as key to minimize gender-based obstacles. From this perspective, the barriers faced by women head teachers are seen as significant consequences of discriminatory practices and unequal institutional structures.

Liberal feminists advocate for the elimination of structural barriers such as discriminated hiring and promotion practices, gendered leadership expectations, and lack of mentorship opportunities through gradual reform (Lorber, 2005). Within educational institutions, these barriers expose as fewer women in top leadership roles despite equality or higher qualifications.

Supporting the female increment in leadership position, gender role theory posits individuals internalize societal norms and expectations regarding 'appropriate' behaviors for both genders, which shape professional roles and leadership perceptions (Eagly, 1987). These norms often relate leadership with traditionally masculine traits—assertiveness, decisiveness, and dominance while expecting women to possess nurturing, cooperative, and submissive qualities (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

In educational leadership, this concept establishes in a 'double bind' where women are taken as too soft when conforming to feminine quality, or too aggressive when displaying traditionally masculine leadership behaviors (Koenig *et al.*, 2011). As a result, women face bias, stereotyping, and resistance from colleagues, subordinates, and even students.

Basing on Liberal Feminist Theory and Gender Role (Role Congruity) Theory, the researcher conceptualizes gender barriers in educational leadership as institutional, cultural, and identity-based challenges (Tong, 2014; Lorber, 2005; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Barrier Type	Theoretical Lens	Explanation
Institutional & policy barriers	Liberal Feminism	Unequal access to leadership roles, biased promotion systems, lack of reform
Cultural & perception barriers	Gender Role Theory	Stereotyping, gendered expectations, resistance to female authority
Leadership identity conflicts	Both	Double standards, pressure to perform gendered roles while meeting leadership demands

This framework helps analyze not just the external barriers (bylaws, policies, structures), but also the internalized social norms and biases that hinder women's leadership existence in educational institutions.

By utilizing both Liberal Feminist Theory and Gender Role Theory, this study critically examined the institutional, cultural, and psychological dimensions of gendered obstacles in educational leadership. The framework supported investigating how female leaders in educational institutions suffered gender obstacles, how they resisted systemic gender bias and eventually, how educational systems can evolve to provide equitable leadership opportunities.

### **Methodology**

This research is based on interpretivism adopting the qualitative approach using narrative enquiry. Rehman & Alharthi (2016) opine that the research paradigm is the way of articulating beliefs about the nature of reality and the way of studying it. Historically, many researchers (*e.g.*, Byerly, 2014; McNaea & Vali, 2015; Redmond *et al.*, 2017; Burkinshaw, 2017) have adopted the qualitative approach in studies of women and female leadership, and they all argue that the subjective approach is best used to understand social reality and women's perceptions, experiences and actions. This study assesses the accomplishments of successful educational women with the aim of inspiring current and future female leaders in the Nepalese education sector. As stated by Mainali (2021) a qualitative approach also supports the researcher in attaining a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by female leaders and to explore their strategies by interpreting their experiences and actions, this study explores an in-depth knowledge of the current status of females' under-representation in leadership roles within the context of the education sector in Nepal. This qualitative exploration thus can be perceived as a narrative of the personal attempts and experiences of females about leadership, that can be challenging while also being a matter of charm and stimulating (AlWahaibi, 2017). The study was conducted in the three public secondary schools led by female head teachers in Syangja district who were selected through purposive sampling strategy.

Considering the ethical subject, the real identity of the head teachers has been used with the pseudonyms (Adhikari, 2025); Dila, Sheela, and Yamuna. The informants were asked about their lived experiences regarding the obstacles that they face while struggling to reach the leadership role, running the schools because of being female and dealing with such obstacles. The tools used during the study were unstructured

interview questionnaires. After the collection, the information was coded, thematized, and analyzed theoretically and practically. Finally, the conclusion was drawn. In order to ensure ethical consideration, the consent for using the information given by them was taken from the informants so as to maintain the right to privacy. Next, the pseudonyms according to their preference is accepted.

### **Data analysis and Interpretation**

During the data collection, the three female headteachers, who are leading the secondary schools, were interviewed. After transcribing the audio record, it was translated and thematized with the use of codes to have critical analysis and meaningful interpretation drawing significant conclusions.

### **Results and discussion**

#### **A brief description of the participants**

##### **Dila**

She began as a 'teacher of the lower second level' and progressed to a head teacher role. She has a master's degree and prior experience as a teacher trainer, which positioned her for further opportunities in the leading atmosphere.

##### **Sheela**

She started her career in the school being a lower secondary level teacher. She had been assigned the class teacher for a long time. On the basis of her good responsibilities, she had been designated to the head teacher.

##### **Yamuna**

Her profession in the school began from a secondary level teacher transitioned to an assistant head teacher. After her previous head teacher resigned suddenly, she got the position of the head teacher though facing many exercises.

### **Interpretation of Results**

The findings presented here are the narratives by the female head teachers under different themes. Based on the information gathered following themes emerged. They are presented and analyzed associating the research questions.

## Women's access to leadership roles and responsibilities

Women's access to leadership is shaped by structural, institutional, economic, and cultural forces. It refers to the degree to which they have equitable opportunity, representation, authority, and decision-making power within political, economic, social, and organizational institutions. It encompasses not only numerical participation in leadership positions but also the structural, cultural, and institutional conditions that enable or restrict women's advancement to positions of influence. Following it, to some extent, I found that the women head teachers were assigned the leadership to avoid the potentiality of emerging fear of breaking the priority order. Yamuna states, *'I was given the responsibility of the head teacher in the decision of the committee because of the apprehension that as soon as the priority order was broken, many more problems would be created here.'*

In addition, the qualification, leadership readiness, responsibility, and professional growth too crave the path to the leading post. Dila puts:

*...I was a teacher and my higher qualification was also my master's degree at that time. And the thing came up as, 'Well, if Madam takes responsibility, let's see.' So, I took it. And accordingly, I also wanted to show my ability. Because I had worked as a teacher trainer before. And I was able to teach the previous high school very effectively for around ten years.*

However, the female headteachers had to face certain attitudinal and organization biases against women leaders in higher education administration that tend to block women's access to higher education leadership. Yamuna expresses:

*...while the other group, who is watching the activities of the school from outside, who is not actually a parent in the school, expressed a little doubt. They suspected whether a woman could run an educational institution in such a private place.*

Women leaders often face a double bind: being perceived as either too soft or too aggressive (Catalyst, 2007). Yamuna adds, *'They said that the leader should be strict sometimes. But the females were soft and we could not make strong decisions.' Compared to males, females are believed to have emotional and passionate look over things. Yamuna further states, 'It is believed that what men are doing is okay but women are soft-spoken, and they cannot make decisions...they look at things a little bit emotionally and passionately.' Despite the assumptions, the women leaders are*

*required to prove their capability of leading the institution. 'I also wanted to show my ability... because I had worked as a teacher trainer before.'* (Dila). Similarly, Sheela explains, *'How much expertise is there in their subject; those things are judged. And there are questions for the students about the teachers' performance.'* They had to even demonstrate personal initiative in seeking to improve themselves.

### **Work-life balance, societal expectations and gender stereotypes**

The women head teachers are required to effectively manage and allocate time and energy for the work responsibilities along with personal life roles, such as family and relatives, neighbourhood, and social activities. Maintaining a harmonious relationship between profession and personal environment appears as a challenge for such female leaders. Sheela notes:

*Moreover, I have family responsibility as well. My kitchen role is still upon my shoulder similar to the contemporary house wife. Next, serving the neighbours while at home, visiting them on various functions, is my equal responsibility. As I am engaged in various social organizations, I have to significantly manage my time even in the social activities. Balancing my work-time with my personal activities sometimes creates fatigue and monotony.*

### **Experiencing the same challenge, Yamuna explains:**

*I am a mother and my child is very young. I have to take care of him and my busy husband as well. And there is a situation where a mother who carries family responsibility has to tie up with the relatives and other social activities with respectful attitude. Coping this family and other responsibilities with my profession has become a bit problematic to me.*

Society expects some kind of so-called shared norms, values, and standards regarding the females' behaviour and performance. The head teachers illustrated such societal doubts and biases toward female leadership, especially in communities unaccustomed to women in decision-making positions. Yamuna shares, *'While giving to the woman, people look suspiciously at what happened, how this situation happened and so on.'* This reflects gendered scrutiny and the need to prove competence. The head teachers should possess higher qualification and extra quality to get the easy acceptance for the leadership. Dila expresses:

*A question regarding my qualification was being asked. I was a lower secondary*

*level teacher and my qualification was my master's degree at that time which was higher than my required qualification for my teaching level and I had taught the higher level i.e. secondary level in the previous high school for around seven years. Moreover, I had worked as a teacher trainer before as well. When they came to know all this information, only then they believed me and accepted to make me the head teacher.*

The leaders situate leadership within a broader sense, where men are more readily accepted in leadership roles in male-dominated social structure like ours. They must prove their capability through measurable outcomes. Women, as they feel, are often stereotyped as nurturing and emotional, while men are perceived as assertive and decisive. Such stereotypes can influence hiring, promotion, and leadership evaluation processes (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Expressing the same experience, Sheela remarks:

*As we all know, our society is a male dominated society. The whole of our society says that there is a majority of men in the bodies. ...What is different is that society quickly trusts men in the same post, while an environment has been created that convinces women by working and showing their results, as a whole.*

Societal conviction and gender stereotypes pressurize the female leaders for performing extra efforts to put them into the leadership roles. Results in teaching, collaboration, and student performance become tools of validation. Social recognition of women in leadership is portrayed as conditional, depending on demonstrated effectiveness rather than automatic authority. Sheela put her experiences:

*...I had to show my results as a teacher then from my small work to show that I was capable, if I could show a collaboration with the parents, a performance with the students, teachers and the community, only then the community would believe me for the leadership. ... the thing is that society believes only after showing good performance, madam.*

In order to build trust in their leadership, the head teachers worked closely with parents, teachers, students, and the outer community creating a supportive environment.

### **Institutional biases and limited access to mentorship or advancement opportunities**

Every institution is operated with its policies, practices, or cultural norms. In order to run an organization properly, sometimes intentionally or unintentionally the concerned people favor certain groups over others in leading roles. Females are tended to be

replaced by the males in the leadership roles as they are taken as soft and undecisive. One of the informants, Yamuna explains,

*As soon as the head teacher resigned, there was a discussion about who should be replaced and there was a lot of advice, many meetings were held because there were many problems and obstacles in that school. And I wondered if I could run the institution because I was a female. Plus, I was not strict-enough in taking decisions.*

Due to such institutional biases and the limited access to mentorship the women leaders had to strive for better performance. Sheela expresses, '*Society believes women leaders only after showing good performance.*' Although the law equates both genders, assigning the responsibility is taken differently. The females are restricted to equal opportunities. Sheela adds,

*'The law sees us as equal. But the matter of giving responsibility is a little different. It is taken as the law is not the only thing that gives responsibility, but it depends on her behavior, her ability to act, her ability to take leadership, her own personal ability, so we find that women are given that role only by looking at that performance.'*

Despite being qualified for the post, the next informant, Dila, faced the same challenge, '*And accordingly, I also had to show my ability ... that's how I got an opportunity.*' Moreover, women are confined to domestic or minor administrative tasks like food distribution, reflecting limited trust and underutilization of women's capabilities. Yamuna states, '*As for women, the stage is kept as long as it is in the interest distribution of food management.*' They are taken as house wives. They are even perceived as a helper, being confined to small tasks. She adds, '*They are seen as the wives. They have to look after the work of the house, they look at the small work, or they are seen as just a helper.*' Yamuna even explains, '*women pull women's legs.*' Sometimes, the female leaders are let down by their own peers. Women are still viewed through traditional gendered lenses in society, seen primarily as domestic figures rather than professional leaders. This reflects deeply entrenched cultural biases. Similarly, despite the lawful equality, the women leaders have to do extra effort to prove themselves capable.

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The women head teachers had to **expose their competence as a leader**. The community only accepts the women's leadership only after seeing **practical achievements and positive results**.

### **Female leaders, performing leadership responsibilities**

Leading any institution especially by the women leaders are full of obstacles and challenges. However, these obstacles and challenges should be handled properly. The head teachers also practiced many strategies to overcome such challenges. They actively participate in the meetings and raise their voices against biases. Dila remembers, *'I went to the meeting and worked as an active participant. When someone was speaking about whom to assign the responsibility of the headteacher, I alone said that it must be given to the one who covers half the sky.'*

The women head teachers created specific plans to progress professionally and build credibility. They engaged in training, research, and reading to broaden their expertise as women must demonstrate competence to gain acceptance, *'Society believes you only after showing good performance.'* (Sheela).

*'I made different plans according to how I could advance my profession and win hearts. Even though I did my master's at that time I gathered experiences and attended different kinds of training, involved in research, and read books so that I could satisfy others' suspicions.'* (Dila)

In order to maintain educational quality along with physical improvement and financial management the head teachers need to be good planners. *'While adding to the overall picture, a principal in the school establishes herself as a planner for physical improvement, financial management, and so on, and for maintaining educational quality.'* (Sheela)

Forming various committees to execute different activities and assigning the equal responsibilities to the colleagues is the next impactful role that the head teachers are found to have applied to mitigate the problems. According to Dila, *'There are different kinds of committees and sub-committees formed in our school and everyone is given equal opportunities. Like they are given separate responsibility for exams, for sports, for extracurricular activities, and so on separately.'*

In order to create harmonious relation and minimize the biases, Yamuna indicates about discussing every issue with the peers. *'I used to discuss it, but I never acted*

*authoritatively for everything. And no matter what the problems were, I proceeded by sitting and discussing everything with everyone.'* Regarding the same kind of peer support and collaboration Dila indicates that the friends and colleagues provided assistance, helping to manage workload and responsibilities *'there is a lot of help from friends.'* Whenever challenges arise in the institution, the collective effort significantly leads to producing meaningful outcomes. She notes that school results improved over time due to collective work and persistence, *'...little by little, they were helping each other very well. So, the school results were getting better.'*

So far as related to the psychology of the students, the head teachers create emotional closeness with them. This provides the leaders pleasant access to study the child-psychology so that she can easily handle the problems of the children.

*'When we go to the classroom and look at the students, we can read their faces better. What kind of pain this child is in, whether he has eaten or not, he is restless, he is in trouble at home, we can read all this very well. In that sense, I can claim to be an administrator who can study the psychology of a child.'* (Sheela)

Not only closeness with the students and colleagues but balancing compassion with parents also bring home along with the society to school which ease the female leaders to deal with the suspicious thoughts because parents feel comfortable to express their opinions with a collaborative female. Sheela advocates, *'Parents can talk to women about everything.'* So, the parents take the head teachers as a model. *'There are mothers, guardians around the village ...They say the same to their daughters that if they study, they can be like me. That's why they take it as pride.'* (Yamuna)

The head teachers had an inspirational impact on the parents. They encouraged their daughters to study so they could be successful like the head teachers. Such expression created a sense of pride among the head teachers and it would promote girls' education and empowerment.

## **Discussion**

This study emphasizes the gender barriers that limit women's access to leadership roles in schools and how the women leaders overcome those barriers. Via a collection of narrative stories of the head teachers, the finding was drawn. The head teachers were initially doubted about their capability to lead, like other female leaders are, especially in male-dominated or rural communities that impacts the representation of females in the

leadership roles. As women are often perceived as domestic caretakers or helpers rather than professionals and responsibilities are basically limited to minor or domestic tasks like food management or interest distribution, the head teachers were also assigned with minor responsibilities and they needed to transit from such minor tasks to authoritative responsibilities such as carrying up leadership duties, enhancing public speaking skills, scrutinizing staff coordination and teacher development, managing administrative work, providing trustful guidance to students, keeping casual parental relationships, engaging in community interactions, and so on that exposes the remarkable change in the institution. Fane (2025) reveals concerns related to identity and representation in leadership roles, the perceived responsibility institutions have to influence change, the existing barriers, the coping strategies used to manage the challenges, and the strategies used to create diverse pathways to leadership. This shift is perceived only when women demonstrate their competence in leadership roles. The head teachers had to show initiative in taking on higher responsibilities, aiming to make measurable improvements in student outcomes and teacher performance.

Female head teachers faced many challenges *i.e.* balancing professional life with family life, societal skepticism, gender perception and practice, institutional barriers, and resource and financial constraints. They bear a crucial part of family and caregiving responsibilities, which can affect their career progression for which they strive much to fail the organizations' possible assumption that women are less committed to leadership roles due to family obligations, which may reduce opportunities for advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Gender stereotypes create an influence on how leadership qualities are perceived. Leadership characteristics such as decisiveness, assertiveness, confidence, and determination are often associated with males rather than females. The female leaders had been judged as soft-hearted, less decisive and less competent which could have negatively affected hiring and promotion decisions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, they adopted collaborative leadership styles and became trustworthy for the designation. Resource limitations and financial constraints exacerbate the challenge. The women leader tried to address those challenges balancing the constraints and resources with fair and effective management.

The research demonstrated how the women head teachers cope up with the barriers. The headteachers served as role models for colleagues and students. Similar to the findings of Adhikari (2024), female leadership in schools involves planning, foresight, and practical arrangements to make complex operations manageable. Being good planners,



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