

Towards Gender Equality and Economic Empowerment: An Analysis of Demographic Components of Rural Women in Imo State, Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract: This study was to analyze some demographic variables influencing the participation of rural women in the informal sector of Imo State, Nigeria. Descriptive analysis was applied on the data collected from a survey conducted in nine Local Government Areas of Imo State. Two thousand, three hundred and forty women were selected using multi-stage sampling. The selection of nine LG As constituted the first stage and the selection of eighteen communities constituted the second stage. After selecting these villages/communities, we chose some households from these selected villages. In the fourth stage, we selected the wife of head of household or the head of household (if female). Results obtained showed that rural informal economic activities by women are affected by the following demographic variables; age, household size, number of children, marital status, place of residence and place of work in their attempt to improve the living standard of the rural women. The results also revealed that demographic variables within rural areas are dynamic in terms of space. Since the women's activities rely heavily on family labor, the implication is the absence of a social welfare scheme, the presence of child labor, and little or no observance of the minimum wage requirement. Government policies should be formulated in this regard.

Keywords: Demographic variables, rural women, informal economic activities, Imo State, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Gender and the informal sector are currently of concern to individuals, groups and governments. Prior to the 1960s, women were often regarded as an invisible factor in development. Their role and contribution were not significantly recognized; hence Anele [1] opined that the production of knowledge about African women can be used to transform social relations in the direction of gender equity and social justice.

There are a large number of women in rural farming and processing. It is these income-yielding informal economic activities by women that make them indispensable in the process of rural development. However the women in this sector are exploited, poor and overworked [2]. Presently, as more men leave for the urban areas, rural-urban migration being more selective of adult males, more and more women are left to head rural households and provide them sustenance and one wonders if their demographic strength can be a catalyst to their economic empowerment. According to Kuponiyi and Awe [3] women who fall within the age bracket of 19 to 48 years work hard to contribute to enhanced standard of living. Also the contribution of children and youths in farm work was recognized by Farooq [4] and Ijere [5]. According to Ijere [5], every family ensures that the women, children and youth engage in farm work. To consolidate this, each child at birth is given a fruit tree which he or she must tend through life.

Obadan, Odusola and Akerele [6] assert that informal sector activities in many Nigerian households have become the major components of household survival strategies in the face of economic hardships. These activities enabled them to cope with their declining standards of living and counter deteriorating economic conditions. The number of children staying with a rural woman engaged in informal economic activity can determine her volume of contribution to household food security [3]. On the other hand, girls are more likely to discontinue their schooling and street trading, which utilizes child labor, often resulting in exposing children to rape and prostitution [7].

It is based on all the aforementioned interrelated problems of development, economic empowerment and standard of living and in recognition of the de-emphasis of women's role in rural development and their informal economic activity that this study sought to analyze demographic variables that influence women in their informal economic activities using Imo State as a case study.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Over the past two decades the role of women in Nigeria has undergone changes. There has been a progressive change in their role from that of a housewife, whose main task is bearing children and caring for children and husband, to that of contributing to the economy. Within this period, woman's effective contribution to the home and the national economy has been faced with constraints such as lack of access to land, and capital. The perception of women in the society occasioned by the Biblical Theory of Gender Differentiation, the African Theory of Gender Differentiation, Social Stratification Theory, Cultural Theory and Genetical and

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Biological Theory has contributed to the creation of these constraints [8]. In view of developing a framework for sustainable gender policy in Nigeria, Ezewu [8] advocated a theory of gender complementarity and procedural gender equality. The theory advocates guaranteed equality between men and women even as they play their role within the family. It believes that women and men have specific contributions to make towards national development and, as a result, the enabling environment should be created *via* legislation and policy formulation [9]. According to Ezewu [8] the theory of procedural gender equality ascribes equality to men and women in the place of work within the larger society and contribution to national economy. Thus, outside the marriage environment, the man should be seen as equal to the woman. The difference between them is their ability which is the only determinant of what they can do or attain.

METHODOLOGY

The main source of data for this study is information from sample survey of 2,340 women respondents. A questionnaire was used and the multi-stage sampling technique was adopted. In the first stage, nine Local Government Areas were selected from twenty-seven LGAs in the three geopolitical/senatorial zones of Imo State using the stratified sampling technique, in which each zone was taken as a stratum. In the second stage, 18 communities were randomly selected using the table of random numbers. In the third stage, systematic sampling technique was used at intervals of ten to select households for the survey in each community. In the fourth stage, the wife of the head of household was chosen as the respondent. Where the head is a polygamist, the first wife of the household is selected. Where the head of household is a woman, then she is automatically chosen. Where the sampled head of household has no wife, the next house is chosen and thereafter the sampling interval of every tenth house is adjusted and maintained. Data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly total, frequency counts and percentages displayed in tables.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Respondents' ages vary from 19 to 78 years. Table 1 show that 7.59% of the respondents in the older age category (49 to 78 years) are in Otulu community, with 6.9% in Enyogugu and Mgbidi communities. Dikenafai, Ifakala, Isiekenesi, Nkwerre, Oguta, Okuku, Okwelle and Umunkwo communities have 6.21% each. The younger age category (19 to 48 years) is an active working group. Of the total respondents numbering 2,340, 890 or less than half are between 19 and 48 years of age. This is an indication that there is less involvement of the youthful female population in informal economic activities in Imo State.

Previous studies by Elson [10], Palmer [11], and Onyenechere [12] indicate that there is a time women get "locked in" to child care, which is observed by the near absence of women within the age brackets of 16-34 years from the labor market in most developing nations. A time when women get "locked in" is typically described by Elson [10] as phases of raising children which physically have to be undertaken by women-pregnancy, childbirth, breast feeding. It is the lack of economic independence that forces

women into dependence on men for these phases of child rearing, phases which according to Elson [10] are particularly difficult to combine with income-earning. On the other hand, Palmer [11] argues that it is because of gender, and not biology, that most of the work of child rearing is done by women, which invariably often leads to the phenomenon of absent markets. Having made the same observations too, Onyenechere [12] concluded that in the informal labor market of parts of Imo State in Nigeria, there is significant difference between age and gender. However, these studies, though having accepted gender – biased inequalities have camouflaged other demographic factors that would be useful for policy formulations for women especially those in rural areas.

A greater insight into the impact of demographic variables on rural women informal economic activities can be got by examining the household size. Table 1 is informative that the household size in the study communities is large. Households with more than ten persons claim 15.15% in Orodo, 12.12% in Umuguma and 3.03% in Amaraku, Ifakala, Isiekenesi and Nguru Nwenkwo each. Of the total number of respondents 2,340, those with 7-10 persons number 1, 300 and those with above 10 persons are 330 respondents. These ratios put together are more than half of the total number of respondents. It indicates a predominance of large household size. Those with 0-6 persons in their household are only 710 respondents which is less than one-third of the total number.

The informal sector provides the greatest opportunity for employment in the developing countries [13]. The large size of the household has very serious influence on rural women informal economic activities. In Imo State family members constitute a substantial number of the workforce in the informal sector. It implies that most of the members of these large households are involved in the informal economic activities of the rural women. This is true in the area of farming and food processing, unlike artisan/handicraft informal economic activity which requires more skill and training than the other rural women informal economic activities. A number of studies carried out in the Southern states of Nigeria demonstrate that women constitute a vital labor force in the farming system especially in food crop production. A study by Nweke [14] showed that women are concerned with food crops such as cassava, maize and vegetables. Results of a study by Adebayo and Amao [15] revealed that women engaged in production of maize, cassava, melon (100%) yam, cocoyam, cowpea (73.9%) while those producing cowpea, maize, soyabean accounted for (82.52%) vegetables, tomatoes and pepper (94.73%). His finding is corroborated with that of Abdullahi [16]. Women are also involved in livestock production, goat / sheep and duck and local fowl accounted for 100% while piggery and rabbitry accounted for 59.21%. It is also reported that yoruba women occupy important positions in the economic institution, not only in farming but also as traders of locally produced cash or food crops [17]. Olayiwole [18] observed that rural women in northern Nigeria participate in income – yielding activities such as food processing, selling of home prepared foods and produce, and weaving. Only few members in the study area can be integrated in artisan/handicraft activity and generally small households are more involved.

Table 1. Percentage Distribution of Age and Household Size

Communities	Age			Household Size			
	Older	Younger	Total	0-6	7-10	Above 10	Total
Amaraku	50	80	130	30	90	10	130
%	3.45	8.99	12.44	4.23	6.92	3.03	14.18
Dikenafai	90	40	130	40	90	0	130
%	6.21	4.49	10.7	5.63	6.92	0	12.55
Enyiogugu	100	30	130	20	80	30	130
%	6.9	3.37	10.27	2.82	6.15	9.09	18.06
Ifakala	90	40	130	50	70	10	130
%	6.21	4.49	10.7	7.04	5.38	3.03	15.45
Isiekenesi	90	40	130	40	80	10	130
%	6.21	4.49	10.7	5.63	6.15	3.03	14.81
Mgbidi	100	30	130	30	80	20	130
%	6.9	3.37	10.27	4.23	6.15	6.06	16.44
Nguru Nwenkwo	60	70	130	60	60	10	130
%	4.14	7.87	12.01	8.45	4.62	3.03	16.1
Nkwerre	90	40	130	50	50	30	130
%	6.21	4.49	10.7	7.04	3.85	9.09	19.98
Oguta	90	40	130	80	50	0	130
%	6.21	4.49	10.7	11.27	3.85	0	15.12
Okuku	90	40	130	10	100	20	130
%	6.21	4.49	10.7	1.41	7.69	6.06	15.16
Okwelle	90	40	130	30	80	20	130
%	6.21	4.49	10.7	4.23	6.15	6.06	16.44
Orodo	30	100	130	50	30	50	130
%	2.07	11.24	13.31	7.04	2.31	15.15	24.5
Orsu-Obodo	70	60	130	40	90	0	130
%	4.83	6.74	11.57	5.63	6.96	0	12.59
Otulu	110	20	130	10	100	20	130
%	7.59	2.25	9.84	1.41	7.69	6.06	15.16
Owerre Nkwoji	80	50	130	40	60	30	130
%	5.52	5.62	11.14	5.63	4.62	9.09	19.34
Umuguma	70	60	130	10	80	40	130
%	4.83	6.74	11.57	1.41	6.15	12.12	19.68
Umuna	60	70	130	90	40	0	130
%	4.14	7.87	12.01	12.68	3.08	0	15.76
Umunkwo	90	40	130	30	70	30	130
%	6.21	4.49	10.7	4.23	5.38	9.09	18.7
Total	1450	890	2340	710	1300	330	2340

Source: Author's Fieldwork

In the context of the above discussion, studies by Bryceson [19], Soetan [20], Palmer [11] and Elson [21] as well as Elson [22] have provided the general background to

gender related issues. According to them, largely as a result of S.A.Ps (Structural Adjustment Programs), diversification out of agriculture has become the norm among African rural

populations, and female participation in the labor market as well as the sale of home-making skills among women is on the increase. Bryceson [19] observed that over the last 20 years men's labour returns from cash-cropping have diminished, undermining their role as family providers, while the attitudes of men in relation to women's income-earning work have changed radically over the last decade. In this study unlike Bryceson [19] which documented conti-

mental trends and rural change, exemplifies the demographic strength of rural women in income generating activities in the informal sector. An important point to note about women's work is that in rural areas, opportunities available to work as a formal sector wage earner is very limited so that most women in rural areas are self-employed. However, these activities which form the bulk of women's work usually go unrecorded and unnoticed [23].

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Number of Children

Communities	0-4	5-8	Above 8	Total
Amaraku	50	70	10	130
%	5.75	5.1	5	16.26
Dikenafai	40	80	10	130
%	4.6	6.3	5	15.9
Enyiogugu	40	70	20	130
%	4.6	5.51	10	20.11
Ifakala	60	70	0	130
%	6.9	5.51	0	12.41
Isiekenesi	40	80	10	130
%	4.6	6.3	5	15.9
Mgbidi	50	70	10	130
%	5.75	5.51	5	16.26
Nguru Nwenkwo	40	80	10	130
%	4.6	6.3	5	15.9
Nkwerre	50	80	0	130
%	5.75	6.3	0	12.05
Oguta	80	50	0	130
%	9.2	3.94	0	13.14
Okuku	20	90	20	130
%	2.3	7.09	10	19.39
Okwelle	50	70	10	130
%	5.75	5.51	5	16.26
Orodo	80	30	20	130
%	9.2	2.36	10	21.56
Orsu- Obodo	40	90	0	130
%	4.6	7.09	0	11.69
Otulu	40	70	20	130
%	4.6	5.51	10	20.11
Owerre Nkwoji	30	90	10	130
%	3.45	7.09	5	15.54
Umuguma	20	70	40	130
%	2.3	5.51	20	27.81
Umuna	110	20	0	130
%	12.64	1.57	0	14.21
Umunkwo	30	90	10	130
%	3.45	7.09	5	15.54
Total	870	1270	200	2340

Source: Author's Fieldwork

The policy implication of the involvement of household members in rural women informal economic activities is that any government that wants to improve rural women informal economic activities will effectively do so by ensuring that minimum wage requirements are observed.

There is a heavy incidence of children among the rural women. Our study shows that not all respondents have children. Most however have children. The distribution of the number of children is shown in Table 2. Communities with above 8 children category accounting for 10% are Enyiogugu, Okuku, Orodoo and Otulu respectively. Only Umuguma accounts for 20% in the category of about 8 children. Of all the communities under study, Umuguma (27.81%) has rural women with the highest number of children, whereas Orsu-Obodo (11.69%) has rural women with the least number of children. The implication is obvious. The number of children by women has positive effects on rural women informal economic activities. While Fasakin [7] buttresses this fact, his study on child labor focused more on its gender component. It revealed that a large proportion of children who work during school hours are girls rather than boys.

In Imo state, mothers often insist on involving their children or incorporating their children into their money-making ventures. Evidence of this can be seen by the number of children that dot the streets, nooks and crannies of rural communities of Imo state hawking food and non food items, and the dwindling number of children that are seen attending school during farm clearing and cultivating period of the planting season. It implies that a rural woman may have all her 5-8 children or above 8 children staying with her in various informal economic activities. It is income from the informal economic activities engaged in by the rural women and her children that she uses to ensure that food is provided for the family. The serious implications that this has for the education of both the women and their children is of concern to many researchers. Merrick [24] pointed out that generally employment opportunity within the informal sector seems to be influenced by such factors as sex, age, length of residence and education. He found out that female workers are quite disproportionately represented, as well as workers outside the primary age group who have not completed primary education and who are not heads of households. Okore [25] noted that the relative recency of formal education for Nigerian women and early marriage of girls in Nigeria amongst other factors are impediments to women empowerment. While Hay [26] opined that gender discrimination is higher in rural areas and at lower levels of education. Thus, education is a variable in the development process; and its influence is all pervading. Nkhoma-Wamunza [27], Acholonu [28], and Akomolafe [29] came to the same conclusion. They support girls and women to acquire education for development. Blum [30] identified education as a facilitating factor for improved extension services in rural communities. Thus, the higher the educational attainment of rural women the greater their empowerment for meaningful utilization of technology to eradicate their poverty. The fact that women in Nigeria have less access to formal education which undermines their empowerment is well documented in the studies of [20] and [29]. Access to education and an improvement of the present pattern of education provided for the rural women will certainly equip

them with the appropriate technical, scientific and mechanical skills for engaging in economic production and in the social services.

The marital status of each rural woman may influence their participation in informal economic activities. The distribution of respondent's marital status is shown in Table 3; some are married, single, separated, widowed or divorced. About 33.33% of the respondents divorced are in Ifakala, another 33.33% are in Nkwerre and Otulu, and these are the only communities with divorced respondents. Of the respondents that are married, Amaraku, Enyiogugu, Isiekenesi and Mgbidi have 4.08% each. Majority of the respondents are married, out of the total figure 2340, we had 1470 married respondents. This result reveals that many of the rural women found engaged in informal economic activities are married. They engaged in these informal economic activities in – order to boost family income. About 590 respondents are widowed; these rural women are also saddled with similar responsibilities as the married ones and as such are engaged in informal economic activity to provide for the needs of the family which range from food to clothing.

Place of residence is another important demographic factor in explaining rural women informal economic activities. Though our respondents share common values and strive to satisfy their main needs not all of them reside within the villages of study. Some reside outside the sampled communities. However, majority reside in the study villages. Out of the 2,340 respondents 2,120 reside within the study communities only a few respondents (220) live outside (see Table 4). And the place of work distribution from Table 4 shows that the place of work of almost all the respondents is within the village. There are others too who work outside the village.

Rural women who farm, trade, process food and engage in craft work in their community are those who indicated within the village as place of work. Of the total respondents 2,340 served the questionnaire, 2,130 indicated within the village as their place of work. The study further revealed that 20 respondents indicated the town as their place of work, whereas 30 respondents indicated neighboring village. The main place of work of the rural women is their community, many rural women work in their community rather than outside.

The issue of rural women's place of work cannot be discussed without consideration for the rural women's other roles. Rural women have responsibility for both home/child rearing and income generation. They often prefer to choose a place of work that will certainly allow them room to engage in informal economic activity whilst at the same time being close to the home to perform their other daily duties. This explains the huge number of rural women who restrict their place of work only to the community they reside in, since family responsibilities are known to increase women's preferences for flexible occupations, however this explanation is not conclusive. Feminist (gender) theories and neoclassical theories agree that flexible jobs in terms of hours and relatively easy entry/exit/re-entry enable women to combine work and family responsibilities more easily. Work place flexibility is a tool used to obtain the business benefits of flexibility. It is also a necessary prerequisite to survival in the global market [31]. Flexibility as a concept is the greater

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Marital Status

Communities	Divorced	Married	Separated	Single	Widowed	Total
Amaraku	0	60	0	50	20	130
%	0	4.08	0	20.83	3.39	28.3
Dikenafai	0	80	0	20	30	130
%	0	5.44	0	8.33	5.08	18.85
Enyiogugu	0	60	0	10	60	130
%	0	4.08	0	4.17	10.17	18.42
Ifakala	10	50	0	10	60	130
%	33.33	3.4	0	4.17	10.17	51.07
Isiekenesi	0	60	0	10	10	80
%	0	4.08	0	4.17	1.69	9.94
Mgbidi	0	60	0	30	40	130
%	0	4.08	0	12.5	6.78	23.36
Nguru Nwenkwo	0	90	0	10	30	130
%	0	6.12	0	4.17	5.08	15.37
Nkwerre	10	70	0	10	40	130
%	33.33	4.76	0	4.17	6.78	49.04
Oguta	0	70	0	0	50	130
%	0	4.76	10	0	8.47	113.23
Okuku	0	100	100	0	30	130
%	0	6.8	0	0	5.08	11.88
Okwelle	0	80	0	30	20	130
%	0	5.44	0	2.5	3.39	21.33
Orodo	0	100	0	20	10	130
%	0	6.8	0	8.33	1.69	16.82
Orsu- Obodo	0	90	0	20	20	130
%	0	6.12	0	8.33	3.39	17.84
Otulu	10	80	0	0	40	130
%	33.33	5.44	0	0	6.78	45.55
Owerre Nkwoji	0	70	0	10	50	130
%	0	4.76	0	4.17	8.47	17.4
Umuguma	0	80	0	10	40	130
%	0	5.44	0	4.17	6.78	16.39
Umuna	0	130	0	0	0	130
%	0	8.84	0	0	0	8.84
Umunkwo	0	90	0	0	40	130
%	0	6.12	0	0	6.78	12.9
Total	30	1470	10	240	590	2340

Source: Author's Fieldwork

flexibility in working arrangements in providing more options to achieve balance between a career and a quality life. Though Standing's [32] definition of flexibility would have been more appropriate as his was contextualized in an

engendered discourse. In this study women were able to take advantage of work place flexibility when they needed time off for domestic duties. Anker [33] in her study advances two possible reasons why "female" occupations tend to be

Table 4. Frequency Distribution of Place of Residence/Work

Communities	Live Outside Village	Live within Village	Work in City	Work in Neighbouring Village	Work Outside Village	Work Within Village
Amaraku	20	110	0	0	10	120
%	9.09	5.19	0	0	6.25	5.63
Dikenafai	0	130	0	0	10	120
%	0	6.13	0	0	6.25	5.63
Enyiogugu	20	110	0	0	0	130
%	9.09	5.19	0	0	0	6.1
Ifakala	0	130	0	0	0	130
%	0	6.13	0	0	0	6.1
Isiekenesi	0	130	0	0	20	110
%	0	6.13	0	0	12.5	5.16
Mgbidi	0	130	0	0	0	130
%	0	6.13	0	0	0	6.1
Nguru Nwenkwo	0	130	0	0	10	120
%	0	6.13	0	0	6.25	5.63
Nkwerre	0	130	0	0	0	130
%	0	6.13	0	0	0	6.1
Oguta	20	110	0	0	10	120
%	9.09	5.19	0	0	6.25	5.63
Okuku	0	130	0	0	10	120
%	0	6.13	0	0	6.25	5.63
Okwelle	10	120	0	0	20	110
%	4.55	5.66	0	0	12.5	5.16
Orodo	20	110	0	2	20	90
%	9.09	5.19	0	66.67	12.5	4.23
Orsu- Obodo	0	130	0	0	0	130
%	0	6.13	0	0	0	6.1
Otulu	10	120	0	1	10	110
%	4.55	5.66	0	33.33	6.25	5.16
Owerre Nkwoji	0	130	0	0	0	130
%	0	6.13	0	0	0	6.1
Umuguma	20	110	0	0	10	120
%	9.09	5.19	0	0	6.25	5.63
Umuna	70	60	0	0	10	120
%	31.64	2.83	0	0	6.25	5.63
Umunkwo	30	100	20	0	20	90
%	13.64	4.72	100.0	0	12.5	4.23
Total	220	2120	20	30	160	2130
	2340		2340			

Source: Author's Fieldwork

flexible in terms of hours and labor turnover. It could be that women gravitate towards occupations with these charac-

teristics. Or, it could be that occupations become "female", because of the type of sex stereotyping-with flexible working

conditions, a consequence of the fact that these are “female” occupations. In view of these rural women’s efforts, gender complementarity and procedural equality should be embraced by all. and as more women in the informal sector gear up to impact positively on the lives of fellow women and other vulnerable groups, children inclusive, it is expedient that the scientific imperatives of conceptualizing, analyzing and selecting justifiable options be well streamlined and exemplified for them in the process of their empowerment and economic independence.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has analyzed demographic components of rural women in the informal sector of Imo State and has discovered that there is less involvement of the youthful female population in informal economic activities, there is a predominance of large household size and children are used as labour force in the informal sector especially in the family farming enterprises because of their heavy incidence. Economic reasons underscore variations in numbers of children/family sizes aside sociological facts. It has shown that many of the rural women in the informal sector are married and engaged in economic activities in order to boost family income. And the women preferred to reside where they would take on family duties whilst engaged in their informal economic activities. From this study, there exists a great rationale for the rural women themselves while leaning on their demographic strength in informal sector activities to balance it with the adoption of labor laws and welfarist approaches. In addition, the following recommendations were made;

1. Introduction of enlightenment campaigns on economic empowerment for younger women in order to increase their participation in income yielding ventures which will ensure their self confidence and self reliance;
2. Men and women should see themselves as stakeholders in building a just society;
3. The formulation of policies that should equalize opportunities between women and men and redirect resources to those investments with the highest social returns, as well as ensure that minimum wage requirements are observed;
4. Recognizing the position of the child under the 1989 United Nations convention and the Organization for African Unity charter (Article 6 & 27), government should encourage investment in poverty targeted social assistance programs that will provide cash grants to poor families with school age children;
5. Government should increase opportunities for women’s education by making provision for the education of women with special needs e.g. the handicapped, women in the riverine areas, introducing 2% of the E.T.F (Educational Trust Fund) to pay allowances to female students, increasing the ratio of females in its implementation of U.B.E (Universal Basic Education), encouraging formal adult-basic-education of non-literate women, ensuring that greater proportion of the curriculum content of the program

for girls are geared towards the development of skills needed in the world of work today and adopt gender sensitive approach to employment and also try to tackle the problems of low income to reduce family hardship that prompt child labor;

6. To empower women also, women must change their own negative attitudes or perception of their abilities; and
7. Lastly, the views of women need to be incorporated into policy formulation.

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