

Written submission from NGO Safe Space (SHW0038)

1. Executive summary

1.1. This submission focuses on sexual harassment within the international charity sector. The authors are an independent group of women who work, or have worked, for major UK-registered and funded international development and humanitarian organisations.

1.2. Sexual harassment in the international charity sector is widespread and underreported. Our own confidential survey reveals multiple examples of sexual harassment – ranging from inappropriate comments to rape – being perpetrated against women, often by senior male managers and those in positions of authority.

1.3. In many organisations, existing safeguards and whistleblowing arrangements are not adequate or trusted by employees. Reports of harassment are often disregarded, perpetrators are protected by their senior positions, and victims are given little support. As a result, inappropriate behaviours are normalised and many victims are forced to leave their jobs.

1.4. To help end sexual harassment in the international charity sector, we call for the UK Government to:

- Set high normative standards for workplace behaviour
- Support independent and accountable investigations

1.5 We also call for the Government to support and encourage the international charity sector to:

- Push for effective implementation of anti-harassment policies
- Strengthen measures to protect staff and beneficiaries from harassment
- Increase victims' confidence to speak up

2. Introduction

2.1. This submission focuses on sexual harassment within the international charity sector. The authors are an independent group of women who work, or have worked, for major UK-registered and funded international development and humanitarian organisations. The authors have prepared this submission in their personal capacities and on a voluntary basis.

2.2. In addition to reflecting the authors' own experiences of sexual harassment – at both an individual and structural level – the submission draws upon evidence and testimonies from the wider sector. Eighty-one people provided input through an anonymous, online survey created by the authors between 23 February and 8 March 2018.¹ Direct quotes from these testimonies are used throughout the submission. Further information was gathered from informal interviews with women who were uncomfortable sharing their experiences through the survey.

3. What is the scale of sexual harassment in the international charity sector?

3.1. Sexual harassment in the international charity sector is widespread and underreported. Recent revelations of behaviour and abuses at Save the Children and Oxfam, backed up

by information collected for this submission, indicate that to public surprise, sexual harassment of women occurs in organisations with a mission to protect rights and promote gender equality, and with high ratios of female staff.

3.2. Most contributors to this submission (of which 80% identified themselves as women)ⁱⁱ reported that they personally experienced sexual harassment of some form whilst working for international charities. Even more reported being witness to an incident of harassment in the workplace. Far more widespread than sexual harassment are other forms of bullying and intimidation in the workplace.

3.3. A large proportion of the reported experiences of sexual harassment were of inappropriate language, including unwanted advances and suggestive comments of a sexual nature. Women also reported more serious offenses such as inappropriate touching, sexual assault and rape.

“I have been lucky enough to only experience very low level inappropriate comments from men in the workplace. This is normally hidden behind jokes.”

“I have definitely experienced cases of sexist and ambiguous remarks and jokes at the workplace - but often not directed specifically to me but just accepted in general.”

“I’ve experienced harassment several times. From allegedly less harmful comments and jokes focusing on my body, "sexiness" and beauty to unwanted physical contact.”

“Inappropriate touching, constantly invading personal space in an aggressive manner.”

“At office drinks, when ordering the first drink, was told I was very beautiful while being grabbed by the waist. From then on, small stares, knocking on my chair when passing by, pulled my hair. Had to completely stop talking with this person for these micro invasions to stop. Never went to office drinks ever again.”

“In front of my colleagues, after joking about my recurring problems with insomnia, my direct supervisor moved his face extremely close to mine and informed me that the issue was that I was "sleeping alone" and that I should seek him out. This same man frequently requested that briefings with female staff be done with his office door locked and if protests were expressed his response was "don't you trust me?".

“I was sexually harassed by a very senior Director. Verged on stalker behaviour - barrage of emails, texts, requests (sometimes via his PA!) to come into his office for a 'little chat'. Was directly told not to mention our "chats" to other people, as they wouldn't understand.”

“In the most recent situation I was harassed by a male worker who was under my direct supervision. He first made personal advances inviting me for dinners, drinks, sending me texts with obvious intent to have sex with me. Other colleagues - men AND women - repeatedly hinted me about his interest

in me. It felt like an attempt to normalise these types of advances towards me.”

“I was assaulted years ago when I was just starting in the sector and I handled it myself and did not report. Then unfortunately, by not reporting a female colleague experienced the same thing.”

“I’ve had a man try to lock me in his office to rape me so I could get a UN job.”

3.4. Unlike most other sectors, employees of international charities may work in a range of environments: from an office in a UK-based headquarters to a remote office or crisis situation on the other side of the world. Women shared experiences of being sent on overseas missions by UK-based and funded organisations where they were consequently harassed or felt vulnerable and poorly protected from potential harassment.

“I have experienced sexual assault and harassment while deployed [overseas]. This varied from non-consensual sex (can we call it rape?), unwanted kissing and touching, inappropriate messages and comments by colleagues with who I was living and working.”

“Sent on a mission to xxx. Not provided security briefing. Not provided mobile phone. Put in apartment style accommodation in same building as my colleague who was an alcoholic and got drunk and harassed me at my door for 3 hours screaming swearing and demanding to be let in.”

“When travelling security assessments are not gender sensitive. Risks for a woman traveler, especially when alone, are not clearly identified.”

“Prostitutes were being brought in to the compound at night, sourced by the local staff for the expat logistician who left also after a couple of weeks. The female staff felt it was a security issue for us.”

“I’ve been sent into field missions without proper support where I was harassed and made uncomfortable by beneficiaries as well as local law enforcement.”

“I was sexually assaulted by the supervisor of my supervisor one evening as I was walking back to my accommodation and he offered to walk me back for my safety.”

“I was raped by the driver working in the same delegation as I was. I did not report it as I was afraid to lose my job. It happened that a few days before I was raped I complained that drivers were constantly coming to work being drunk.”

4. Who is at risk of sexual harassment in the international charity sector and what is its impact?

4.1. Anyone is potentially at risk of sexual harassment but almost all people who contributed to this submission reported that sexual harassment is predominantly experienced by women. From this point onwards, the submission will therefore focus on the experiences of women, whilst noting that men, particularly gay men and men in female-dominated environments, can also be victims of harassment.

4.2. Pervasive inequalities in the workplace and wider society make all women vulnerable to sexual harassment regardless of seniority, whether they are national or expatriate staff, based in headquarters or a remote overseas office. Certain groups of women are particularly vulnerable: namely young women early on in their career; women in junior roles; women on low paid and insecure contracts; and women of colour. Beneficiaries of development and humanitarian assistance are also vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, with the case of Oxfam in Haiti being just one example.

“Women are the target of sexual harassment. It is normally young women who are targeted or those in low paid positions.”

“I would have to say mainly women experience sexual harassment, both expatriates and local beneficiaries and staff.”

“Frontline workers in contexts where women have no power have been discovered to have harassed women seeking assistance/humanitarian aid.”

“On a mission I have witnessed sexual harassment where representatives of another NGO used their position to intimidate local women into performing sexual acts in return for food vouchers.”

“Something very important is to recognise that we cannot talk about purely sexual harassment in a vacuum; there is substantial institutional racism involved too.”

4.3. Women of colour and from ethnic minorities are underrepresented in this evidence (12%) for a number of reasons: low representation within the UK international charity sector meaning that anonymous reporting is very hard to achieve; compound discriminating experiences of racism in the workplace which also go unchecked; lack of trust in official processes and lack of solidarity from colleagues reduces safety to report through any channel. We acknowledge the missing experience of women of colour from this submission.

5. What is the impact of sexual harassment?

5.1. The impacts of sexual harassment are diverse and long-lasting. From the examples shared, the impact of harassment can be grouped as follows:

5.2. Psychological impact:

Survivors of harassment reported to us that they experienced fear, humiliation, anxiety, depression and stress which affected their mental health. Such symptoms were experienced as a result of the abuse itself, but also in the lead up to and aftermath of reporting cases of abuse, which can sustain for years.

“[Harassment] can lead to poor self-esteem and lack of confidence in the women, or feelings that they are not being valued in the workplace for work related reasons.”

“The impact can be psychologically harmful, degrading, belittling of the person, draining of energy.”

“The impact is as with most forms of abuse of power: it can leave people feeling humiliated and scared, but also trapped.”

5.3. Professional impact:

Harassment in the workplace impacts negatively on women’s confidence in themselves and their organisations. Dealing with the psychological impacts of harassment affects an individual’s performance at work. Women take measures to protect themselves from harassment which impede their career development, such as not speaking up in the workplace in order to avoid attracting attention to themselves, and passing up opportunities which might mean working alongside a known offender. Many women fear they will be denied interesting work and chances for advancement if they speak out. Only 1 in 3 respondents of our online survey said that they felt confident that they could report a case of sexual harassment and it not affect their career.

“Reporting such on one’s or others behalf has serious negative implications on the reporter’s career, while perpetrators rarely face any consequences as someone will recommend the lad for another job.”

“Staff who speak up, find themselves shunned at the office and squeezed out of their jobs. Younger staff can find this devastating to their careers.”

“The impact isn’t mild; it makes women less inclined to speak up as it draws attention to themselves when they are already the unwilling recipient of attention. This denies their contributions to the organisation; it reduces the likelihood of performing well and so reducing their chance of career progression.”

“Idealistic people either lose their faith and drop out of the sector, quit their job, or become cynical when nothing happens to the men doing the perpetrating.”

“It most certainly affects team dynamics and efficiency.”

“It damages the organization’s image and discredits the hard work done. It also sets a bad example for new people arriving in the NGO.”

5.4. Economic impact:

Many women reported that they, or colleagues, had chosen to leave their jobs rather than speak up about harassment. Conversely, there is a perception that perpetrators can continue climbing the career ladder without impact on their professional reputation. Women reported being denied promotions, not having their contracts renewed, or being pushed out of their jobs as a consequence of speaking out. Many women have become resigned to harassment being a ‘price for advancing’.

“Many victims would rather leave then risk losing their reputations, so the result is likely a high number of assaulters remain employed, while many victims leave.”

“Some women who say no get their contracts terminated and their careers end.”

“I was fired two months after [reporting] this incident for being too difficult to work with.”

“The impact is the gender pay gap, loss in productivity and respect.”

“I lost my job when I reported one incident. My female boss called me a prostitute, easy going. The perpetrator made sure I left the organization.”

5.5. Cultural impact:

When sexual harassment is not called out or seen to be dealt with, it sustains a culture of impunity and inequality. Silence and inaction perpetuates a cycle of harassment, bullying and intimidation. Women and other vulnerable groups continue to be treated with less respect.

“We live with it, we have normalized it and believe it’s just part of the job.”

“Power is slowly stripped away and stolen by the harassers.”

“The impact is to create a culture in which there seems to be impunity for men and a sense that women should keep quiet and be grateful for their job opportunities.”

6. Who are the major perpetrators of sexual harassment in the international charity sector?

6.1. Perpetrators of sexual harassment are predominantly men, and predominantly men holding positions of authority within an organisation. Perpetrators are found at all levels of the workplace but may also be from other agencies (government, donors, partner organisations) that women in the international charity sector work alongside. In workplaces outside the UK respondents highlighted expatriate men in senior positions as being amongst the worst perpetrators.

“The perpetrators are almost 100% males in positions of authority.”

“It is frequently perpetrated by those in authority or those wishing to exert an authority that they do not have.”

“It does tend to be females who suffer from dominating men in roles of authority.”

“It is often by more senior colleagues within the organisation, but equally also by government officials, who often hold power over whether an organisation can work in a particular area/have access to decision-makers.”

“Perpetrators are normally those who have worked for the organisation for a long time and are very close to senior managers or are senior managers. They have a lot of colleagues they manipulate due to their position.”

6.2. At the most recurrent end of the harassment spectrum, inappropriate language and unwanted physical contact is often easily dismissed as a joke or misunderstanding,

unintentionally causing offence. The blame is often turned on the receiver for being 'too sensitive' or 'difficult'. Cultural differences are frequently used to excuse incidents of harassment, especially when they take place outside the UK.

"Calling out the behaviour is stigmatised as one is said to lack a sense of humour."

I've certainly witnessed and experienced a macho culture in which everyone is expected to be 'tough enough' to deal with heckling, sharp remarks, crass jokes and innuendo. You're made to feel as if you're humourless if you don't join in and you aren't one of the boys."

6.3. Broadly, harassment occurs where there are unequal power positions. Whether power is real or perceived, perpetrators of sexual harassment abuse their power over others.

"As with many sexual and gender-based crimes, sex itself is only one element, alongside power."

"Power relations are such that the perpetrators are men in higher positions who women/staff need to meet with, talk with on a daily basis. making things strained and harder."

6.4. Some have suggested that within the international charity sector some men (and women) develop an inflated sense of power – sometimes referred to a 'hero complex' – which makes them (and others) feel that any actions are justified when their work is for a good cause. Unacceptable behavior in the international charity sector is too often excused because people working in this sector are operating in difficult environments and are sometimes posted away from home for long periods of time.

"There's a general tendency amongst humanitarians and those who do 'heroic' roles, including in senior positions and very political roles, to lack the usual professional boundaries."

A lot of behaviour that would be unthinkable in a 'domestic' environment is normalised and tolerated [in a humanitarian environment] due to excuses related to the 'environmental pressures'".

6.5. Similarly, even when cases are reported, there are cases where organisations seem to have chosen to protect perpetrators who 'deliver results' over all else. The worst offenders of sexual harassment are therefore the individuals who, because of their positions of power, are allowed to go unchecked, unchallenged and unquestioned by the wider organisation and whose behaviours escalate in severity with time.

"In organisations where power is unchecked, a culture of bullying develops and disempowered (lower level) staff are likely to experience sexual harassment."

"Their buddies and the power structures gather around them to make sure that "due process" is observed - which usually means bending over backwards to make sure the man is protected and dragging the women

through a humiliating and terrifying process which often leads to them dropping the charges.”

7. What measures are already in place to prevent sexual harassment and how effective are they?

7.1. A huge gap between paper and practice:

The majority of international charities, especially the larger ones, have anti-harassment policies. However, while many policies and reporting mechanisms are in place, they are not widely known, not easily accessible and are not well trusted by employees. Codes of conduct were often signed at the start of contracts but are not routinely enforced. There is a perceived gap between what exists on paper and what happens in practice, suggesting organisations may be paying lip-service to preventing sexual harassment.

7.2. Following recent scandals, some organisations have made efforts to remind staff of their existing policies, what support is available and the reporting channels. But there is a need for these processes to be proactively and regularly communicated regularly, rather than only shared reactively in response to media coverage of violations of the policies.

7.3. Lack of confidence in existing mechanisms:

Many of those responding to the survey lacked faith in existing procedures, questioning their confidentiality, or stating that they did not go far enough to protect the most vulnerable. Some Human Resource (HR) teams were not trusted to uphold confidentiality and even the effectiveness of third-party anonymous hotlines was called into question.

7.4. Two-thirds of respondents felt that reporting a case of sexual harassment could affect their career. More senior and more experienced women reported feeling more confident in reporting. A distinction was made between feeling confident to report sexual and gender based violence but not other forms of harassment or bullying, which may not be taken as seriously.

7.5. The reasons for this lack of confidence in the existing procedures were fear that complaints wouldn't be taken seriously; that reports would not be confidential; fear of repercussions; being labelled as difficult or a troublemaker; and recognition that the burden of proof is on the person who reports. Some said they had seen others report incidents which were not dealt with. Some feel that organisations give priority to organisational reputation and find it easier to 'deal with' junior staff than senior ones. It was felt that many senior male staff can continue working or go on to other jobs with impunity, while women are penalised.

“Even though my organisation says they treat it seriously basically they sweep in under the carpet and let the least experienced person go. So the victim or perpetrator could be let go depending on how valuable they are to the project. But the victim isn't protected.”

“The violators are in positions of power and they get rid of anyone who reports.”

“in one way or another the reporter of the abuse always seems to end up with negative consequences on their career meanwhile perpetrators seldom have any negative consequences - perhaps the perpetrator's current contract is not extended but he soon will be recommended for another nice position.”

“Sexual harassment / assault was supposedly forbidden in their code of conduct. When the incident was reported their only concern was their reputation, and they wanted to make sure I would not speak out or sue them.”

“[There was] absolutely no support for accusers and [I] was left feeling humiliated.”

“The whistleblowing system is renowned for being broken and putting the whistleblower at risk.”

“During a harassment investigation I’ve been outright threatened by the perpetrator.”

”When I eventually complained to HR (took ages, as I was so worried it would leak & damage Organisation X), was encouraged to keep it informal, due to the potential risks to X.”

7.6. Procedures fail to accommodate cultural differences:

While some respondents believed that their organisation’s charitable role and human rights based ethos was a protective factor that made sexual harassment less likely, others suggested that HR policies did not sufficiently recognise the power dynamics and cultural norms that differ greatly in different countries of operation.

7.7. A big barrier in these countries was the belief that the reputation of someone reporting harassment would be called into question. Policies and procedures did not take the role of women in the local context seriously. Concerns were raised about reporting having to go up a hierarchical chain of male leadership or through intimidating investigation teams. Senior positions at the top of the organisational hierarchy were predominantly occupied by men and calls for a female focal point had been denied.

“We have robust policy and procedures in place at a strategic and operational level, implementing these in the field is a challenge where often the female role in the host society is a subservient one...”

“Investigation teams...are made up of police and lawyers who are more interested in legal definitions than in the survivor, etc. Women are not believed, and that goes to the heart of it all.”

“I’ve had policies in each organization but these feel like whitewashing. Investigation protocols are terrible and archaic. Women are often penalized for reporting because they are seen as weak.”

“In countries where bringing a labour lawsuit forward isn’t feasible, national female staff are particularly vulnerable. There is no culture of holding power to account internally - people are afraid to challenge the system/their managers”

“I was 5 months pregnant and told that the harassment I’d witnessed would potentially destroy [the perpetrator’s] career. He told me if I wanted to keep

talking about I could see if any other organization would hire me in «my state».”

7.8. The understanding of what constitutes harassment differs between countries and there is a need for policies to create a shared definition and ensure this is implemented across the organisation through training.

7.9. Lack of training and HR capacity:

A number of respondents reported that they had received briefings on their organisation's sexual harassment policies and procedures during initial training and had signed codes of conduct. Others mentioned online courses. However there was a sense that training was often under-funded, poorly rolled-out, not regularly refreshed and in some cases was seen as box-ticking. This was a larger problem in countries of operation than in head-office countries.

“I recall trying to give a session at the senior management training on codes of conduct and why you can't have sex with sex workers or beneficiaries – only to be introduced and immediately knocked down to size by one of the HR men as ‘Here comes xx to tell you why you can't do all of the things you want to do that are fun’.”

7.10. Staff handling complaints in overseas offices, particularly in countries with poor HR capacity, were not given sufficient training to handle incidents that did occur.

“Being hired to work on gender equity issues and then told by my male boss to “go fuck yourself” when I brought up issues.”

7.11. What works?

Examples of good practice were highlighted by respondents. There were cases cited where the organisation's code of conduct was well known and carried serious weight. In these organisations the code was signed by employees at all levels as part of their contractual arrangements and staff were given regular briefings that referenced the Code.

Respondents also cited the importance of regular briefings at headquarters level for departing staff on how to report harassment and additional briefings for coordination or senior staff on how to respond to reports and means of supporting staff.

7.12. Ethical committees that are able to carry out investigations independent from operational decision makers were cited as an effective mechanism for dealing with incidents/accusations of harassment. It is important that these committees are given sufficient power to act and that their decisions carry weight. Unions are another place to go for advice and support, but they are not routinely publicised and membership is low.

7.13. One respondent highlighted the existence of an ‘Abuse prevention unit’ that was publicised to staff in some offices, although not in every office or unit, and not usually in the local language. Another highlighted that the safeguarding team in their organisation was well known, proactive and supportive in the undertaking dismissals for sexual misconduct.

8. Recommendations for action

8.1. Based on our own experiences, and those of the women and men who shared their experiences with us, it is clear that concerted action is required to end sexual harassment

in the workplace, including the international charity sector. Existing levels of harassment in the workplace are impacting women's mental health, limiting their professional development, damaging their economic opportunities and sustaining a culture of impunity and inequality.

8.2. We call upon the UK Parliament to help end all forms of bullying, intimidation and sexual harassment in the workplace. We also call upon the UK Parliament to help push for a culture shift in the workplace and wider society: one that no longer tolerates or normalises bullying or that sexualizes women in their place of work; one that encourages speaking out; and one that fully respects, values and believes women.

8.3. To end sexual harassment in the international charity sector and other workplaces, we call upon the **UK Parliament** to:

Set high normative standards for workplace behaviour

- Lead by example: ensure that all reports of sexual harassment in the UK Parliament are rigorously investigated and perpetrators brought to justice.
- Develop clear national guidance for employers and employees on what constitutes unacceptable and inappropriate behaviour, bullying and harassment in the workplace.
- Use international platforms such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union to develop global standards and guidance on ending sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace.
- Require all UK registered and funded organisations to sign up to a Code of Conduct against sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace.
- Request DFID to report to Parliament on measures taken by UK-funded organisations to prevent sexual harassment, and on the numbers of cases of sexual harassment reported each year by each organisation and the outcomes of these cases.
- Support a national public campaign encouraging men and women to call out all forms of unacceptable behaviour in the workplace.
- Request the Charity Commission to provide clear guidance and resources for international charities to fully implement a Code of Conduct against sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace.

Support independent and accountable investigations

- Call for the establishment of a fully independent body to investigate cases of sexual harassment in the workplace and to oversee implementation of a Code of Conduct against sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace.
- Request the Charity Commission to review and communicate clear guidance to charity trustees on their responsibilities in overseeing reports of sexual harassment and bullying.

8.4. We also call upon the UK Parliament to make the following recommendations to all UK registered and funded international charities:

Push for effective implementation of anti-harassment policies

- Review and communicate anti-harassment policies and reporting procedures to all staff, trustees and beneficiaries on a regular basis.
- Develop accessible tools, such as posters in local languages, to remind staff and beneficiaries in the UK and overseas of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour in the workplace and how to report cases of harassment.

Strengthen measures to protect staff and beneficiaries from harassment

- Ensure all staff and trustees complete mandatory trainings on preventing sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace, diversity and inclusion and repeat these trainings every two years.
- Provide all staff travelling or working overseas with gender-sensitive security briefings and adequate safeguarding measures to reduce the risk of sexual harassment.
- Strengthen procedures for vetting and reference-checking new employees and trustees to prevent offenders being rehired.
- Include questions to test applicant's understanding of harassment in all interviews.
- Hold all senior managers/Country Directors within the organisation accountable for preventing harassment and bullying in the workplace e.g. through individual performance indicators.

Increase victims' confidence to speak up

- Demonstrate that reports of harassment are dealt with seriously and confidentially e.g. through publishing the number of reports lodged and their outcomes.
- Increase training for HR teams to deal appropriately with reports of harassment and bullying. Larger organisations should invest in specialised investigators, counsellors, etc.
- Ensure that investigation units include a female focal point.
- Take proactive measures to promote greater diversity in senior leadership roles within the organisation, including on Boards.

Annex

ⁱ Individuals working in the international charity sector were invited to share their responses to the following questions through an online survey <https://admin.typeform.com/form/MXpqYS/>

1. Firstly, in your view, who experiences sexual harassment in the workplace? Who perpetrates it and what is the impact of sexual harassment on different groups?
2. If you have personally experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, or been made to feel

vulnerable to harassment, would you be willing to provide further information about what happened?

3. If you have witnessed sexual harassment towards others in the workplace, would you be willing to provide further information about what happened, and how widespread the problem is.
4. What measures has your organisation already put in place to prevent harassment and support victims of harassment? Please comment on how widely known and effective they are.
5. Do you feel confident that you could report a case of sexual harassment in the workplace without it affecting your career? Please comment on why/why not, including any examples.
6. Do you feel confident that a reported case of sexual harassment would be dealt with effectively by your organisation? Please comment on why/why not, including any examples.
7. Finally, what actions should the Government and international development charity sector take to change workplace culture to prevent sexual harassment, give people more confidence to report sexual harassment, and make this issue a higher priority? Do you have any examples of what has already worked?

ii Summary of the survey response rate and respondents:

1. 81 individuals completed the online survey between 23 February and 8 March 2018.
2. Of those who completed the survey, 65 (80%) identified as women and 12 as men. Remaining respondents chose not to answer this question.
3. The average age of those who shared their age was 40.
4. 62 respondents (76%) identified themselves as White, White British or Caucasian. 10 identified themselves as Black, Mixed Race, Asian or other. 9 chose not to answer this question.

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