

GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN



HIGHLIGHTS

- There are 1.8 billion young people (10-24 years old) in the world. Approximately half of them – 880 million – are adolescent girls and young women.ⁱ
- Trends show that one in three girls in developing countries (excluding China) are likely to be married before the age of 18 and one in nine girls will marry before their fifteenth birthdayⁱⁱ. In 2010, over 67 million women aged 20-24 had been married as girls. If such trends continue, 142 million girls will be married every year in the next decadeⁱⁱⁱ.
- Globally, young women aged 15–24 are most vulnerable to HIV, with infection rates twice as high as in young men, at 0.6%. This disparity is most pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa, where 3.1% of young women are living with HIV, versus 1.3% of young men^{iv}. Each minute one young woman acquires HIV, accounting for 22% of all new HIV infections, with sexual transmission being the dominant mode of infection^v.
- Figures on the magnitude of human trafficking are difficult to calculate, but using improved methodology, recent 2012 ILO estimates suggest that women and girls make up 55 per cent of the estimated 20.9 million people trafficked^{vi}.
- Approximately 140 million girls and women in the world have suffered female genital mutilation/cutting, with more than 3 million girls in Africa annually at risk of the practice^{vii}.

There are 1.8 billion young people (10-24 years old) in the world and the majority live in developing countries. They are the largest generation of youth in history. Approximately half of them – 880 million – are adolescent girls and young women. These girls and young women possess huge untapped potential. When educated, healthy, safe from discrimination and gender-based violence, and equipped with the right skills and opportunities, they hold the key to unlocking many of the world's most pressing problems: reducing poverty, advancing gender equality, catalyzing countries' social and economic development, halting the spread of HIV, reducing maternal mortality, and ending violence against women, among many others. As educated mothers, they will invest in the survival, education and success of the next generation. As leaders of today and tomorrow, they can be a force for social change. Yet despite the potential of girls and young women, they are often overlooked in the planning and implementation of many development programmes, and are often excluded from participating in decision-making processes in their families and communities. Many youth serving programmes tend to benefit older, educated, urban, and largely male youth. Not only is investing in girls and young women a human rights imperative, but it is one of the smartest investments any country can make.

Key Challenges

Adolescent girls face many challenges in their transition into adulthood. Doubly-disadvantaged by gender and age

discrimination they often face diminished opportunities and choices. Their education is often





compromised and they are subject to serious health risks, and threatened by violence. Their views and concerns are often unheard. Among the poorest countries, the Least Developed Countries, girls' primary completion rates remain low, at 62 per cent^{viii}. Even if girls are in school, they are the first to leave when needed for domestic chores or to be caregivers, and are often forced to leave due to child marriage or pregnancy.^{ix} Gender-based discrimination in the labour market, traditional practices, fewer opportunities and the lower value placed on women's economic contributions all leave young women with higher rates of unemployment or tied to traditionally unpaid, family-based work.^x Moreover, youth unemployment rates have proven more sensitive to economic shocks than adult rates, and young women have more difficulty than young men in finding work. When young women do find work, it is often lower paid and in the informal economy, in unprotected, low-skilled jobs.^{xi} Many countries that have improved education for girls and young women also need to focus on school-to-work transitions.

Gender inequality and discrimination are key determinants of health status. Each year approximately 16 million adolescent girls give birth, the majority of which occur among married girls in developing countries. Pregnancy- and childbirth-related complications are the number one killers of girls aged 15 to 19.^{xii} Physically immature and often with few resources, the youngest, first-time mothers are most at risk. Obstetric fistula, a devastating childbirth injury, affects an estimated 2-3.5 million girls and women in the world, and about half of the cases are among first-time mothers.^{xiii} Moreover, babies born to adolescent mothers face greater risks than those with older mothers: stillbirth and death are 50 per cent more likely for babies with mothers under age 20 than those with mothers 20 to 29 years old.^{xiv}

Child marriage is a health issue as well as a human rights violation. Many young brides face poverty, ill health, abuse, unprotected sex carrying the risk of HIV, frequent pregnancies, an end to education and few positive life options.^{xv} Trends show that one in three girls in developing countries (excluding China) are likely to be married before the age of 18 and one in nine girls will marry before their fifteenth birthday. In 2010, over 67 million women aged 20-24 had been married as girls. If such trends continue, 142 million girls will be married every year in the next decade^{xvi}. Child marriage is a form of violence not only because of its overall impacts that affect all aspects of a girl's life but also because it often results in very direct forms of physical, sexual and emotional violence. Girls who are married young often lack status and power in relation to their husbands and in-laws, resulting in increased risks to violence and abuse. Women who marry early are more likely to be beaten or threatened, and more likely to believe that a husband might sometimes be justified in beating his wife. This is especially true when there is a big age gap between the child bride and the spouse.^{xvii} It may also be worth mentioning that the social isolation that results from child marriage also often translates in child brides having little or no ability to leave abusive partners and secure social and legal support to remedy their situation.

National Violence against Children Surveys show that among women aged 18–24 years, nearly 38% in Swaziland^{xviii} 27% in Tanzania^{xix} and 32% in Zimbabwe^{xx} reported experiencing some form of sexual violence before the age of 18. As much as 30 per cent of women report that their first sexual experience was forced^{xxi}

Increasingly the data and evidence is proving that gender inequality is a driver of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, which is leading to higher infection rates among young women than young men. Globally, young women aged 15–24 are most vulnerable to HIV, with infection rates twice as high as in young men, at 0.6%^{xxii}.





Young adolescent girls are not only biologically more susceptible to HIV infection; they are more likely to have older sexual and partners who use injecting drugs, thus increasing their potential exposure to HIV^{xxiii}. Women and girls provide up to 90% of the care needs generated by HIV/AIDS^{xxiv}. A considerable burden of this care work is carried by children, two-thirds of whom are young girls. Girls' involvement in domestic work contributes to their lower levels of educational enrolment and achievement, because they are more likely than boys to be pulled out of school to provide care for people living with HIV/AIDS.

An effective HIV and AIDS response must address the structural determinants impacting HIV transmission - such determinants include enabling legal and policy environments, economic security, access to and ability to stay in school, and gender equality among others. For example, several studies have concluded that enhancing a woman's economic security can help her negotiate safer sex. Furthermore, when girls have access to education, they are less likely to marry early. Many girls are married against their will, often experiencing violence. Legislation and policies can help create an environment where early and forced marriage is prevented.

Despite the growing attention that has been given to prioritizing key populations that are at higher risk, little explicit focus has emerged on the particular needs of young people in these populations. At the same time, efforts to prevent HIV among young people have tended to focus on the general population of young people, for whom more is known about effective programming, instead of focusing on young people in most-at-risk groups. As a result, young people who inject drugs or sell sex and young men who have sex with men are often not targeted in either type of programming. Despite significantly higher risk of infection and prevalence, prevention spending on young people at higher risk is typically a fraction of total prevention spending.

Additional facts and figures on HIV and girls and young women

Young women and girls and HIV

- Young adolescent girls are not only biologically more susceptible to HIV infection; they are more likely to have older sexual and partners who use injecting drugs, thus increasing their potential exposure to HIV.^{xxv}
- In several regions –like Eastern and Southern Africa and West and Central Africa—the number of adolescent girls aged 10-19 living with HIV is about two times that of adolescent boys.^{xxvi}
- According to the most recent population based surveys in low- and middle-income countries, only 24% of young women and 36% of young men responded correctly when asked five questions on HIV prevention and HIV transmission.^{xxvii}
- Generally, fewer young women than men 15–24 who have been tested and received their results on HIV infection.^{xxviii}
- Female condoms are not as widely promoted as male condoms, although global distribution has increased – from 11.8 million in 2004 to 50 million in 2009. Still, there is little availability, with only 1 for every 36 women worldwide.^{xxix}





Structural Issues Impacting Transmission among Youth

- Countries with high HIV prevalence among young women are equally challenged by high teen pregnancy rates, and the consequences of unintended pregnancies in terms of unsafe abortion.^{xxx}
- The prevalence of forced first sex among adolescent girls younger than 15 years ranges between 11% and 48% globally.^{xxxii}
- A recent study^{xxxiii} conducted in South Africa demonstrated that young women who experienced intimate partner violence and had high gender inequity in relationships had increased incidence of HIV infection, substantiating findings from previous studies.^{xxxiii}

HIV and maternal mortality

- Globally, HIV has an enormous impact on maternal, infant and child health and survival. It is now the leading cause of mortality among women of reproductive age, and HIV contributes significantly to maternal mortality.^{xxxiv}

Young women care giving and education

- Women and girls provide up to 90% of the care needs generated by HIV/AIDS.^{xxxv} A considerable burden of this care work is carried by children, two-thirds of whom are young girls.^{xxxvi}
- Girls' involvement in domestic work contributes to their lower levels of educational enrolment and achievement, because they are more likely than boys to be pulled out of school to provide care for people living with HIV/AIDS.^{xxxvii}

Young women and girls and peace and security

Conflict impacts girls and young women differently from boys and young men and presents several challenges. Girls and young women in conflict situations are at greater risk of sexual assault, as well as forced recruitment into armed groups. They are vulnerable to deliberate attacks against schools and hospitals, and conflict exacerbates the rate of girls dropping out of school due to school closures, general insecurity, economic stress in the family and unequal burden of care giving and domestic work. In emergencies and conflict contexts, girls and young women often forego meals or are given less food than male family members and livestock. They are forced to marry early or engage in unsafe livelihoods, including transactional sex, and are at risk of sexual exploitation by armed actors. Conflict and post-conflict situations also increase early and unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, the prevalence of HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, with grave consequences to young women and girls' reproductive health.

Recovery programmes often neglect or bypass girls and young women, because disarmament programmes do not see them as combatants or members of armed groups, and aid distribution doesn't reach young women and girls confined to the home because of social norms or insecurity. Furthermore, the stigma associated with sexual violence prevents girls and young women from reporting rape and abuse.





Girls and young women and gender-based violence

Across all economic strata, many adolescent girls and young women worldwide live under the constant threat of violence and abuse. In some countries, up to 70% of women face physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime at the hands of their husbands/partners, according to available country data.^{xxxviii}

Globally 35.6% have experienced either intimate partner violence and/or non-partner sexual violence. Nearly one third of ever-partnered women (30.0%) have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner, and 7.2% of adult women have experienced sexual violence by a non-partner. Some women have experienced both.^{xxxix}

Trafficking ensnares millions of women and girls in modern-day slavery. Women and girls represent 55% of the estimated 20.9 million victims of forced labour worldwide, and 98% of the estimated 4.5 million forced into sexual exploitation.^{xi}

Approximately 140 million girls and women in the world have suffered female genital mutilation/cutting, with more than 3 million girls in Africa annually at risk of the practice.^{xii}

Key Opportunities

Despite the inequities girls and young women face, protecting and fulfilling their rights has a positive catalytic effect on societies as a whole, promotes gender equality, and contributes to poverty reduction. For example:

- When women and girls over 16 earn income, they reinvest 90% of it in their families, as compared to men who invest only 30 to 40%.^{xlii}
- Each year of primary school boosts girls' eventual wages by 10 to 20%. An extra year of secondary school: 15 to 25%.^{xliii}
- A study of 100 countries found that every 1% increase in the proportion of women with secondary education boosts a country's annual per capita income growth rate by about 0.3 percentage points.^{xliv}
- Young women who are educated are better able to delay childbearing and to ensure the health and education of their children.^{xlv}
- Each extra year of a mother's schooling cuts infant mortality by between 5 and 10%.^{xlvi}
- Educated women are more likely to resist abuses such as domestic violence, harmful practices such as female genital cutting, and discrimination at home, in society or the workplace.^{xlvii}





The United Nations' System Approach

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) together provide a legal framework and a comprehensive set of measures for the promotion and protection of human rights throughout a woman's lifetime. In addition, the CRC and CEDAW are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

The international community has also adopted a number of agreements or declarations that refer to adolescent girls and that set forth strategic objectives and actions. The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 and the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 is international consensus agreements that strongly support gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

In 1995, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY), a blueprint for action that covers 10 priority areas, with five new priority areas added in 2007. *Girls and young women* is one of the original 10 areas of the Programme of Action. Investing in one area of the WPAY affects other areas of the Programme of Action, thereby creating a multiplier effect in the lives of young people and their communities. Many countries have established youth policies. Within this process, it is imperative to note that the WPAY mentions that governments and youth organizations should promote an "active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes."

Unleashing Girls' Power and Potential: The UN Adolescent Girls Task Force

Recognizing the particularly complex situation of adolescent girls, the UN Adolescent Girls Task Force (chaired by UNFPA and UNICEF, and includes ILO, UNESCO, UNHCR, UN Women and WHO) launched a joint initiative to advance the rights of adolescent girls, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized. It works with governments, civil society, and communities to deliver high-impact policies and programmes that:

- 1. Educate adolescent girls:** Ensure that adolescent girls have access to quality education and complete schooling, focusing on their transition from primary to post primary education and training, including secondary education, and pathways between formal and non-formal systems.
- 2. Improve adolescent girls' health:** Ensure that adolescent girls have access to age appropriate health and nutrition information and services, including life skills-based sexuality education, HIV prevention, and sexual and reproductive health.
- 3. Keep adolescent girls free from violence:** Prevent and protect girls from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation, and ensure that girls who experience violence receive prompt services and access to justice. Specific attention will be paid to girls in displacement, as they are increasingly prone to abuse.
- 4. Promote adolescent girl leaders:** Ensure that adolescent girls gain essential economic and social skills and are supported by mentors and resources to enable them to participate in community life.





5. Count adolescent girls: Work with partners to collect, analyze, and use data on adolescent girls to advocate for, develop and monitor evidence-based policies and programmes that advance their well-being and realize their human rights.

Girls and Young Women and the Post-2015 Agenda

The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have helped to sustain global attention and galvanize international support to promote the realization of the rights of young women and girls. In addition to MDG 2, which aims to achieve universal primary education for both boys and girls, MDG 3 is dedicated to promoting gender equality and achieving gender parity in all levels of education. Furthermore, MDG 4 and 5 strive to reduce child and maternal mortality and improve maternal and reproductive health. There are also a number of other targets and indicators within the framework that relate directly to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, which, if reached, have the potential to dramatically improve the lives of young women and girls.

Nevertheless, as we approach the 2015 deadline for the completion of the MDGs, progress continues to be uneven and is often undermined by multiple and intersectional inequalities. This is particularly the case for many young women and girls who may experience discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, class, religion, and sexual orientation, in addition to age and gender. In an effort to further understand and properly address the challenges faced by young women and girls in the post-2015 development framework, an online discussion was held from 17 December 2012 to 18 January 2013 on young people and inequalities, with a sub-discussion on inequalities faced by girls and young women, as part of the broader UN Global Thematic Consultation on Inequalities.

Among the many recommendations that resulted from the e-discussions, participants highlighted the following priorities for the post-2015 agenda: a) invest in young people and gender equality as a social justice imperative and as a key strategy for poverty reduction and socio-economic progress; b) ensure girls' access to free, quality and comprehensive education at all levels; c) provide equal access to sexual and reproductive health information and services; d) ensure a comprehensive and integrated approach to healthcare for young women and adolescent girls beyond maternal health; e) eliminate gender-based violence, discrimination and stigma against young women and girls; f) promote decent employment and livelihood opportunities for young women; g) address the root causes of discrimination against young people through education campaigns; h) recognize the challenge of climate change for young people, and ensure that a sustainable development agenda is central in the new framework; and i) ensure the participation of young people in decision-making and in developing the new development agenda and its goals.

For further information:

- www.un.org/youth
- UNFPA Fact Sheet: Adolescent Girls' Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs (http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/Reproductive%20Health/Fact%20Sheets/Adolescent%20Girls%20SRHealth_UNFPA%20Fact%20Sheet_July%205%202012.pdf)





- <http://www.ungei.org>
- <http://www.unfpa.org/adolescents/>
- UN Joint Statement on Adolescent Girls
http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/news/2010/joint_statement_adolescentgirls.pdf
- UN Adolescent Girls Task Force (2009) Girl Power and Potential: A joint programming framework for fulfilling the rights of the marginalized adolescent girls.
<http://unesco.org.pk/education/documents/UNAGTF/UNJointFrameworkpdf.pdf>
- Population Council and UNFPA. The Adolescent Experience In-Depth: Using Data to Identify and Reach the Most Vulnerable Young People
http://www.unfpa.org/youth/dhs_adolescent_guides.html
- UNICEF Report Beijing+15: Bringing Girls into Focus, March 2010
http://www.unicef.org/gender/files/Beijing_plus_15_Bringing_Girls_Into_Focus_2010.pdf
- <http://www.endvawnow.org>
- The report on the inequalities consultation that includes the results of the e-discussion on young people and inequalities
<http://www.worldwewant2015.org/node/299198>
- the final discussion summary of the sub-discussion on girls and young women)
<http://www.worldwewant2015.org/node/309953>

ⁱ UNFPA, (2011) “Adolescent and Youth Demographics: a Brief Overview”
<http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/factsheets/One%20pager%20on%20youth%20demographics%20GF.pdf>

ⁱⁱ UNFPA, (2012): “Marrying too Young”
<http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2012/MarryingTooYoung.pdf>





- iii International Centre for Research on Women, Child marriage facts and figures
<http://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures>
- iv UNAIDS (2012) “Women Out Loud: How Women Living with HIV will help the world end AIDS”
[\(http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2012/december/20121211womenoutloud/](http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2012/december/20121211womenoutloud/)
- v UNAIDS (2012) “Women Out Loud: How Women Living with HIV will help the world end AIDS”
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- vi ILO (2012) “Hard to see, harder to count”
http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_182096.pdf
- vii WHO, (2012) “Female Genital Mutilation: Fact Sheet No. 241,” Geneva.
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/>
- viii United Nations, (2012) “The Millennium Development Goals Report 2012”
<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG%20Report%202012.pdf>
- ix UNESCO, (2004): “Who are Excluded and Why?”
- x ILO Brief: Youth Employment: Breaking Gender Barriers for Young Women and Men
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http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_elm/---trends/documents/publication/wcms_143349.pdf
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- xiii UNFPA, (2012) When Childbirth Harms: Obstetric Fistula
<https://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/factsheets/srh/EN-SRH%20fact%20sheet-Fistula.pdf>
- xiv Temin, Miriam and Levine, R. (2010). Start with a Girl: a New Agenda for Global Health.
- xvi *Marrying too Young – End Child Marriage*,
http://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/marryingtooyoung_unfpa_2012.pdf
- xvii International Centre for Research on Women, Child marriage facts and domestic violence
<http://www.icrw.org/files/images/Child-Marriage-Fact-Sheet-Domestic-Violence.pdf>
- xviii UNICEF Swaziland and CDC, (2007) “National Survey on Violence against Children in Swaziland” (Atlanta: CDC)
- xix UNICEF Tanzania, CDC, and Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences. 2011. *Violence Against Children in Tanzania: Findings from a National Survey 2009*. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- xx Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT). 2012. *National Baseline Survey on Life Experiences of Adolescents in Zimbabwe 2011: Preliminary Report*





- ^{xxi} WHO, (2005) WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who_multicountry_study/Chapter5-Chapter6.pdf
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- ^{xxiii} UNICEF, (2011) "Opportunity in crisis: Preventing HIV from early adolescence to young adulthood", pg 34
- ^{xxiv} Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), "Caregiving", in *Women and HIV/AIDS: Confronting the Crisis. A Joint Report by UNAIDS/UNFPA/UNIFEM* (Geneva and New York, 2004).
- ^{xxv} UNICEF and UNAIDS, (2011) "Opportunity in Crisis: Preventing HIV from early adolescence to young adulthood".
- ^{xxvi} UNICEF and UNAIDS, (2011) "Opportunity in Crisis: Preventing HIV from early adolescence to young adulthood". pg 43
- ^{xxvii} UNAIDS, (2011) "World AIDS Day Report"
- ^{xxviii} UNICEF and UNAIDS, (2011) "Opportunity in Crisis: Preventing HIV from early adolescence to young adulthood".
- ^{xxix} UNICEF and UNAIDS, (2011) "Opportunity in Crisis: Preventing HIV from early adolescence to young adulthood", pg 21. Cites: United Nations Population Fund, HIV Prevention Gains Momentum: Successes in female condom marketing, UNFPA, New York, 2011, pp. 12, 15.
- ^{xxx} UNAIDS,(2010) Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic, pg 134.
- ^{xxxi} WHO, (2005) WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women
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- ^{xxxv} Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), "Caregiving", in *Women and HIV/AIDS: Confronting the Crisis. A Joint Report by UNAIDS/UNFPA/UNIFEM* (Geneva and New York, 2004)
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^{xxxviii} Figures are based on data from 40 countries obtained through the three leading international surveys on prevalence, with most survey sites reporting that between 20 and 60 percent of women had experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. Adapted from World Health Organization, 2005, *WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women*, p. 46, Geneva; H. Johnson, N. Ollus and S. Nevala, 2008, *Violence Against Women: An International Perspective*, p. 39, New York, Springer Science + Business Media; [Demographic and Health Surveys](#), ORC Macro, Calverton, Maryland; and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "[International Reproductive Health Surveys: Reports, Publications, and Datasets.](#)" See full compilation of data in UN Women, 2011, [Violence against Women Prevalence Data: Surveys by Country.](#)

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^{xi} Figure derived from data based on a 2002-2011 reference period. International Labour Organization (2012) "[ILO Global Estimate of Forced Labour: Results and Methodology.](#)" p. 14, Geneva.

^{xlii} WHO, (2012) "[Female Genital Mutilation: Fact Sheet No. 241.](#)" Geneva.

^{xliii} Nike Foundation (2009) *The Girl Effect: Not Just about Girls: Engaging Men and Boys is Key to Girls' Ability to achieve their Full Potential.*

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