

## Attitude towards and Relationship with Deserted Women: Bangladesh Context

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### Abstract

*The paper attempts to focus mainly on the attitude towards and social relationship with deserted women in the context of Bangladesh. With the objectives of an in-depth exploration on these issues, the study was conducted in Sylhet city of Bangladesh using qualitative research design and purposive sampling method. Data was collected from 25 participants by using unstructured interview guides and tape recordings were used for collecting data. In the context of Bangladeshi society, desertion has been seen a very common phenomenon with complex views different from many societies. In most of the cases extra marital relationship or second marriage of husband without consent of existing wife is found the prime cause of desertion. Having mixed opinions about social view, generally it is negative reported by the significant numbers of the participants. More than one third blamed our traditional male dominant social structure where women have less or no place to ensure their position. Their acceptance to wider society and social support system depend on how society evaluates them as deserted women with compare to other women. Even their acceptance and access among relatives (both father-in-law and mother-in-law) also influenced by the social context. Except few, majority of them (fifteen) did not have any form of contact where rest of them has direct or indirect contact. Despite having hostile social context, participants have been enjoying warm affection and support from their parents. Attitude and cooperation of the neighbors towards the deserted women were tried to explore. Though few of them have very positive experiences regarding the issue but many of them were found reluctant about it.*

**Keywords:** Attitude, Desertion, Marriage, Relationship, Women.

### Introduction

Desertion has been seen throughout the history but the phenomenon of wives deserted or abandoned by their husbands has been growing invisibly for more than a decade especially in South Asian and other developing

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countries. In present times, developing countries are the major focus of urbanization across the world. Global urban population is growing at a rapid pace from 17 per cent in 1951 to 20 per cent in 2001 and approaching 41 per cent by 2030 (Kadi, 2012). Continuing population growth and urbanization are projected to add 2.5 billion people to the world's urban population by 2050, with nearly 90 percent of the increase concentrated in Asia and Africa. In Bangladesh, as well as other developing countries city areas are expanded day by day. Every year, river erosion alone makes 20000 people homeless. Along with this displaced people, poverty and unemployed situation in rural areas forces considerable number of people to migrate to cities in search of employment (Wahra and Rahman, 1995). A total of 40 - 70 per cent of urban population growth is now attributed to rural-urban migration (Wood, 1998; World Bank and Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, 1998). At its birth, Bangladesh had an urban population less than 5 million. By 1990, this had increased to 22.4 million and a decade and a half later, urban population stood at 42.3 million. At an annual growth rate of 3.7 per cent, urban population growth in Bangladesh has been higher than all other countries in South Asia barring Nepal (World Development Indicators, 2009). Such increasing flow of migration makes cities over crowded with dense slum settlements and worsening poverty. These slum areas are characterized by anonymity and nuclear oriented. So it is easier for men as well as for women to hide their marital history, re-locate and re-marry without anyone knowing they are less likely to face sanctions (Jesmin and Salway, 2000). In many cases migrant men start new families elsewhere, creating a new set of obligation undercut economic support to the first family (Bruce, 1995).

Bangladesh is a densely populated country and it is known to be one of the poorest countries of the world and Bangladeshi women are the poorest of the poor (Mannan, 2000). Poverty is over represented among the women particularly in female headed households due to absence of eligible male members. According to the UNDP Human Development Report (HDR) 2002, in Bangladesh 48% of the population live below the poverty line 1 ( absolute poverty ) who are unable to meet daily calorie requirement of 2,122 Kcal/person and 20 per cent live below the poverty line 2 (ultra poor, also so called hard core poor) intake less than 1,805 Kcal/person. Among them the most vulnerable section is the female headed households particularly headed by the divorced, widowed and abandoned women who formed the majority of hard core poor (Karim, 2001; Mannan and Ahmed, 2012; ADB, 2001; Joshi, 2004; Chain and Khanam, 1985). Despite of vulnerability and the increasing numbers of female headed households, less are documented in our country. Official estimates suggest that less than a tenth of households are headed by women (BBS, 1996), but Afsar (1996) found that the actual proportion could be around 20-30 percent. Among the women headed household over 95 percent of female-headed households in Bangladesh are considered to fall below the poverty line (UNDP, 1996).

Marriage dissolution and desertion profoundly affects financial, emotional, physical, and social conditions of South Asian women. Among them the situation of Bangladeshi women is comparatively dire one (Mannan, 2000). Our patriarchal culture and social tradition confined most of the women within the home. In developing countries most of the women are unskilled and unemployed where in developed countries it is opposite and absence of husband does not have economic havoc in their life except only psychological sufferings. But in a developing country like Bangladesh, absence of male breadwinner has serious consequences on women and as well as their children. It throws women into economic hardship and insecurity. Due to absence of male breadwinner they have to maintain the whole cost of the family which compel them to hard working. Deserted women are considered as the poorest of the poor. Poverty is the prime problem but there are some other problems usually disturb them. It often bound them to lose their control over land and other assets and illiteracy, less or no skill does not allow them to seek job. Moreover, religious restrictions and '*pardah*' also restrict their movement outside the home. Besides, in most of the time their interests have no place in the political institution of village (Hossain and Huda, 1995).

The vulnerability of deserted women not only lead them to hard working but also compel them to engage in illegal or immoral activities to maintain the burden of the family even in most economically affluent country. Based on William Sanger's writing on prostitution, Schafer (2009) claimed that desertion leads women to involve in immoral activities like prostitution. Out of 2000 public women in New York, 525 claimed 'destitution' as the cause. The third largest number said that they had been 'seduced and abandoned' and had become public women after they had been seduced and abandoned. Deserted women have to face lots of problems including social, economic, psychological, religious and related others based on the situation.

Social security system for deserted women in Bangladesh is not as strong to provide basic support. As the government has already introduced limited financial services for them but amount of money and the number of beneficiaries both are not adequate As a social safety net program "Allowance Scheme for Widowed and Husband-deserted Distressed Women" is a admirable attempt of government to improve the living condition of this disadvantage group through delivering cash support. This scheme has important impact on the lives of the rural distressed widowed and husband deserted women in various ways particularly in reducing food insecurity, managing better clothing and medical care. By achieving these basic needs they have earned some degree of dignity and honor in the family and society. Side by side he also uncovers some deficiencies of this Scheme as a means of poverty reduction. It has failed to improve their housing status and to create income generation opportunities for the distressed women and in this way perpetuates their struggle against poverty. He also concluded that this scheme can play more effective role if the Government, with the

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consultation of the main stakeholders, determine the actual need and enhance the amount of allowance accordingly (Islam, 2007).

Due to limitations of government services and absence of non-government activities women of this particular group have to fight against poverty, food, shelter and life insecurity and so on. The situation is also depending on the particular area and the economic condition of women's families. Even some problems are very common and visible to understand but their psychological condition, stress and related factors are often unexplored. Very few studies have attempted to identify their psycho-social problems which often make their ways more critical than poverty or material problems. A deserted or separated woman might have valuable property but if her surrounding social situation, relative perceptions and life security do not permit to move freely, then she might have to face tremendous mental pressure and thus she would be fall in deep psychological crises. So social and psychological aspects should be explored to get a better understand about them.

### **Methodology**

With the objectives of an in-depth exploration on attitude and relationship of deserted women in Sylhet city, the study used qualitative research design. Sylhet city corporation area was selected as the study area. All the deserted women living in Sylhet city considered as the universe of the study. As there is no list or any reliable document about the respondents, purposive sampling method was considered for the study. Data was collected from 25 participants. The data was collected directly from the participants. Data was collected using unstructured interview guides and tape recordings. The collected data was organized, analyzed and interpreted following generally accepted principles and practices associated with qualitative research. Audio tape was transcribed and coded and then examined. Following the objectives of the study, collected data was analyzed systematically and the careful analysis was done. Field notes were organized into a readable narrative description giving regards to the major themes and categories of the design of the research.

### **Result and Discussion**

#### **Causes of being Deserted and Present Condition**

In the context of Bangladeshi society, desertion has been seen a very common phenomenon. In this patriarchal society, women often face brutal social and cultural discrimination, violence and maltreatment. Desertion is one of the important forms of such inhuman practice usually done by husband. Multiple causes are identified but the most common and prime cause is the extra marital relation or second marriage of husband without taking proper legal permission or the consent of the existing wife. At least half of the respondents were the victim of such reality. Few but significant portions of them left their husbands due to inappropriate supply of economic support from their husbands essential for regular family maintenance. They

often faced torture, negligence and maltreatment by their husbands which indirectly lead them to leave husband's house permanently. At least one-third of them were the dowry victim and their inability to provide demanded dowry broke conjugal peace, invited frequent physical and verbal abuse by family members and desertion is the ultimate result. In few cases, desire to get male child or disease of wife indentified as the cause. One of the respondents shared her experience like this way,

*After few years of marriage, my husband sent me to my father's house forcefully as he was not interested to continue our relationship. He did not inform me the cause but it might be happened due to my diabetic. If a person, who is also a doctor, do not wish to maintain conjugal life with me due to physical sickness, then what should I do?*

In our social society where love marriage is not widely accepted, here love marriage between two different castes obviously invites family related violence. Even society also creates pressure over the families and thus it would not be suitable for the couple to led life without any trouble. Desertion is the common result in that situation, if the couple and their families fail to control their emotion. One case was found in this study where wife was bound to leave her husband as she was under sever threat and faced brutal and inhuman behavior. She was physically tortured by brother and sister-in-law in front of her husband. She shared her brutal experiences like,

*My husband's family did not receive me cordially as I am from lower caste. I did not find a single peaceful day there as they always liked to ignore me. I have to do everything but without any recognition. Even they tried to insult my parents and influenced me to seek financial support from them. As my husband's income was not sufficient and several times he borrowed money from my mother. His demand was increasing and at last I was bound to leave him.*

Drug addiction or careless attitude of husband also identified the cause of desertion. Nearly one-sixth of them are the victim of such causes. Even, suspicious mind of husband also invited desertion for at least three respondents. They complained that relatives and nearest people were the perpetrators as they motivated their husband. These people broke their trusty relationship and their repeated propaganda disordered their husband's mind. One of them explained her situation,

*My husband lost his faith upon me as he was driven negatively about my character by few of my relatives. He never asked me about it but quarreled with me regularly and several time brutally tortured me. After that he always locked the door from outside when he went to office. I have to pass lonely time and no access to go outside, even he did not like to communication with my parents and relatives. Situation became unthinkable, unbearable and inhuman which bound me to escape from this hell like house. And one night I escaped from this house alone and I never like to see him again.*

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In our social context, women do not like to live alone without their husband and thousands of women tolerate such inhuman situation only to fear of losing social status. The majority of the respondents did not like to break their conjugal relation, rather tried to continue it unconditionally. But their tolerance did not help them to do it as their husbands were intended to leave them anyhow. Only few of them left their husbands or escaped from their husband's brutality only when it was unbearable for them.

### **Present Living Arrangement**

Except few fortunate respondents majority of them were passing miserable life alone or with family members. Only insignificant numbers have their own house or lived in government quarter where the vast majority has been living in rented house, slums and in parental house. Few of them has been living in parental house with parents or siblings but nearly half of them live in rented house with their married or unmarried children. Unfortunately a significant numbers have been living alone in rented house in slum areas where rent is too cheap to maintain with limited income. They are less fortunate as they have no children or their married children are not interested to live with them. They have regular communication and visit with their children and get support from them. Though it disheartens them but they take it easily. One of them explained like,

*I know how much struggle I have to do but now my child is mature enough to maintain himself. He is married and lives in another house with his family. It would be better for me to get their companion but I would like to respect their freedom. Sometime loneliness grave me but reality is different that is unavoidable. I am happy that they often visit me, provide necessary support as they could and try to reduce my loneliness.*

### **Complex Social Attitude**

Social attitude towards desertion is historically and traditionally complex and in many cases gender biased. Respondents also shared their own experiences and thinking and tried to explain the causes regarding such attitude. Mixed opinions were noted but more than one third blamed our traditional male dominant social structure where women have less or no place to ensure their position. Pre-set mind often fail to understand the women's voice. Moreover, society likes to see them as vulnerable and conservatism bounds women to remain silent. Even nearly one-fourth of them claimed that judgmental attitude of mass people usually like to identify their fault instead of finding the real truth. Many people view it as their inability to cope with husband as mentioned by few of them. One of them explained like,

*From top to bottom, everywhere male are dominating our society. In case of abandonment, there is a pre-set attitude to level us as guilty party. Our weakness is our economic dependency which bound us to remain silent and society capitalizes it perfectly.*

Few of them have opposite experiences and one-third of them notice about it. Few people like to understand our situation, try to assist us in many ways and their positive role help to establish our rights and dignity, as they mentioned. They also indicated that humanitarian attitude, female sensitive thinking and anti-discriminatory perception encourage people to do it. One of them shared her understanding like,

*There are many people in our society who do not like dowry, violence against women and try to understand our real situation. They know why a woman bound to leave her husband and thus try to provide necessary support and cooperation as they could.*

### **Social Acceptance and Facilities**

Their acceptance and social support system depend on how society evaluates them. Even it is also depends on the geographical location and in particularly on the socio-economic condition of the deserted women and their families. For this reason mixed opinions were found but the majority (eleven respondents) has answered negatively. Second largest portion (seven respondents) remained silent as they have not faced anything that could give them an understanding about their situation. Insignificant numbers indicated that people like them where few of them have both positive and negative. They also shared that situation and other circumstances often influence people' behavior and same person behave differently in different situation.

Societal attitude also influences and determines their social access and thus their experiences are not similar. Nearly one-fourth of them have been living in ancestral house since their desertion which limit their opportunity to realize it but the rest of them has multiple experiences regarding social acceptance. Interestingly nearly one-third (eight) found positive social acceptance and they were found happy to get people attention towards their complex life history. They have found their employers, neighbors and nearest people very cooperative and friendly in terms of getting job or work, additional help and kind cooperation. One describe her positive social experiences like,

*I was in extreme trouble and there was little hope for me to survive. One of my neighbors extended his unconditional support to me. He helped me to find a job at a tailoring shop, linked me to a NGO to get legal remedy and encouraged me to fight against it. He did it only as I am a deserted woman, I think.*

But at least one-fourth answered negatively because of malicious experiences faced by them. They complained that people level them as guilty, untouchable and call them as unfaithful and disobedient women. They have to face it at work place, street and even in their close environment. Few of them have experiences of getting immoral proposal at workplace by their employer and thus they have to leave it. Moreover, many people like to exploit them when they come to know their social position. Among them, one described about hostile social acceptance like,

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*How would you feel when people call you as witch? What would you do when your neighbors try to avoid you? I have to pass such brutal and inhuman experiences though I am not guilty. I have to change my house, work place and passed unsecured time.*

Mixed and contradictory opinions were also found about social acceptance as few of them have complex experiences or waiting for face it in future, as they opined. They shared that acceptance is varied based on time, people and situation. If you have sufficient amount of money or family support or power, people would be careful to say you anything, opined by few of them. Those who have been living with their parents have not faced any difficulty in getting acceptance but not sure about future. Reasons of their tension could be understand by following statement given by one of them,

*People as well as my relatives do not say anything due to social position and economic capacity of my family, I think. From beginning of my desertion my parents along with family members have been given all the support to me. But I do not what would be happened after the death of my father. I am worried but I have to wait for the future to observe it.*

Though significant numbers of them shared about positive social acceptance but the vast majority does not get any social or institutional assistance as deserted women. Even their understanding about existing government social services is found poor and many of them have no idea about it. Only few of them have opportunity to get additional help from their employers but it is not fixed and permanent. Only one among all reported that she received food grain from local commissioner in last year but none of them have the opportunity to become the enlisted beneficiary under the ministry of social service.

### **Experiences as Deserted Woman**

Though nearly two-third of them (fifteen) did not have any remarkable experience regarding their present status, but one-third of them have to face some situation. Only three of them shared their positive experiences which helped them to get new aspiration about life. Two of them get additional salary where one was able to get a job with the help of her neighbor. One explained like,

*My employer is very kind and she provides me more salary so that I could meet my family expenditure. Even she tries to help me in many ways and her relatives also do the similar job. Her contribution to me is beyond words and I am happy to get such a woman beside me. Whenever I face any trouble and share with her, her careful and cordial suggestions help me to solve it.*

But among others with negative experiences shared what they have to face in their daily life. Their status became lucrative among known people and in

many ways it hampered their personal and social life. In some cases, their close relatives were the perpetrators and still they are doing it. But one of them has totally different experience as her husband have been trying to establish her as insipid woman by spreading negative information among relatives, known people and even to her colleagues. She claimed that society always support male, believe them and thus she has to suffer, lost job and many more. And another respondent shared about her mixed acceptance like,

*After conjugal conflict I was transferred to Sylhet willingly with my baby where no one knew me. I told my new colleagues that my husband was also trying to get transfer to join with us and honestly I hoped so. Everything was going nice but not for long. After few months of my arrival in this city, my colleagues and other known people became suspicious about my conjugal life, started gossiping directly and indirectly and I have to share the real truth. I was shocked to observe their attitude, to see their change which have made me isolated, introvert and alone.*

### **Relationship with Relatives and Neighbors and their Attitude**

In our societal context chaotic marital relationship invites widespread impact on one's personal and social life, specially on women's life which dominant and dictate their pattern of social relationship. In case of relationship with the relatives of father-in-law, majority of them (fifteen) did not have any form of contact where rest of them have direct or indirect contact. Two-fifth of them has been detached from the beginning of their conjugal unrest as husband's families did not show any interest. Though they have tried to communicate in past but unsuccessful. But another one-fifth remained detach willingly. As they have not received any call apart from their husband's family which bound them to do it. Having no initiatives from husband party clearly indicate that they are no more interest to continue the relationship. It is the clear indication of male dominant social structure where women are the instruments of their pleasure mentioned by them. One of them also added that,

*Without exceptional case a woman leaves her husband only when situation goes beyond control and tolerance. So responsibility goes to husband's family and they should take initiative first. If husband's family does not do it, it is clear that they are no more interest to show respect to a victim woman. If my parents would do it, then what would be happened? Certainly it would make my position weak. For this reason I am contactless and will remain so.*

Interestingly one-fourth still has contact or communication though they are abandoned by their husband. Where some of them have very good communication, others have irregular or indirect communication. Even few of them have been close to their relatives, visit their home and exchange

gifts in different occasions. They identified it as their responsible attitude and take it positively. Despite having in touch with husband's family and relatives not all have warm acceptance here, mentioned by many of them. Only four of them have regular and warm relation with common access. There is no difficulty in communication as mentioned by them, rather a warm atmosphere bind them together. In most of the cases mother-in-law plays vital role as the part of their responsibility. Not only maintaining contact, sometime they provide financial and other support as they could to satisfy themselves, as mentioned by the respondents. Their attitude is very much cooperative, and always like to make the respondents happy.

On the other hand, those who have partial or indirect communication or wish to do, they find different difficulties to maintain it. It is happening from both the parties but mostly by husband's side. Misunderstanding, family restriction (women), distance living, fear of losing social status, poverty, property claim, influence by third party, etc. are the prime barrier identified by the respondents. Respondents shared that in many cases husband's families try to avoid them due to fear of losing their social status and due to fear of claiming inheritance property by the respondents. On the other hand, few of them complained that relatives and third party often try to make gap though they do not have idea about the reasons of it. Only one of them informed that she is unable to communicate as her parents do not like it.

### **Relationship with Parental Relatives, Cooperation and Barriers**

Different opinions were found in case of maintaining relationship with their parental relatives. It is quite natural that parents never like to see their children in difficulties rather in our social context, they try to do the best for them. Opinions indicated that majority of them have been maintaining very good relation with their parents and relatives and at the same time their utmost cooperation has been helping them to feel better. More than half of them have open access to maintain relationship or they have been staying at parental house and have been receiving all sorts of cooperation including moral support. One-fifth of them have relationship but not so good where one-fourth of them have some sorts of difficulties to do it due to poor economic condition of their parents. More than two-third of them has been getting moral, psychological, financial and security related support from their parents or relatives. Even few of them have been living at parental house with or without any self income and enjoying family affection. Without their support it would not be possible for them to survive mentioned by them. They are lucky as their parents tried to establish their legal rights, filed case and arranged local *salish*. One of them describe in the following way,

*I feel proud as I have such a family who never ignore me, rather provide all sorts of support as needed. They arranged everything as*

*they could to ensure my legal rights but was unsuccessful due to hostile situation. Till then I am staying with them without any trouble. Even they always encourage me to think better to live a happy life. I have not faced any problem apart from my siblings or relatives; rather they always express their moral support to me.*

But not all are fortunate as they have difficulties in making warm relation and getting support from their parental house and relatives. Prime cause of not having good relationship is poverty as they mentioned. In few cases, distance living and death of their parents have been working as barriers as their siblings or relatives have less interest to cooperate them. Unfortunately nearly one-fourth of them did not have any contact with their parental house as they did not accept it. Even few were forced by their parents to send back but they opposed. For this reason a mental gap has been working as barrier here to make good relation and to get support. Parental attitude dishearten the respondents and thus have been living alone without making any contact with their parental house or with their relatives. One expressed her grievance like,

*My parents and relatives are well informed about the reason behind my present situation but they never permit me to leave husband's house. I think they are the symbol of our male dominant society and very sensitive about social system. I have failed to motivate them and then I have to only way to stay alone that I am doing now. Though it shocked me but I have tried to contact with them in several times.*

### **Neighbor's Attitude, Cooperation and Non-cooperation**

Attitude and cooperation of the neighbors towards the deserted women were tried to explore. Though few of them have very positive experiences regarding the issue but many of them were found reluctant about it. Respondents with positive experiences (only one-fourth) found pleased about their neighbors as they have been getting support and assistance as deserted women. Neighbors often try to share their problems, helped them to find job and provide financial. But the most importantly they feel happy to get moral support from their neighbors which act as tonic to fight against hostile social system. One of them explained about her satisfaction regarding attitude of her neighbors like,

*Only a deserted woman could understand the impact of desertion in her life. At that time all most everybody and everything work against her. She needs mental support and courage to cope with the changing situation. And, of course, she desires a friendly environment that could be perform by her neighbors, if they wish. I am happy that my neighbors did the right job which enabled me to go forward and to fight against hostile social system.*

Another respondent shared the cause of such cooperation like,

*Many people like to cooperate us but certainly their intentions are nor same. And it differ on the base of gender also. Women do it as*

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*they could easily understand the pain of a woman. But male do it in various reasons. Few people do it as the part of religious duty; few do it to support us where other people might have different cause. Whatever their intentions are, I like to say they are doing it as human being without which we would not get better environment.*

But the vast majority has to face opposite and unfriendly situation. Traditional learning owned by mass people, often inspire them to make lucrative story about one's personal life and many people enjoy it- identified by them as the prime cause. They also added that gender based attitude also influence people to do it as women are seen as the prime suspect at any kind of conjugal unrest. Even people do it as their means of recreation without any justification and usually women do it better than men. As women have more free time than men and thus they like to participate such discussion and try to make more attractive to others. One victim shared,

*After few days of my desertion I have come to know that my husband left me due to my extra marital relationship though it is totally false. Whenever I went to the shared bathing place at our slum, it seemed to me that other women were not interested to talk to me. It was a clear message to me that people, specially my neighbor women would continue it for long. Observing everything, my family decided to change our living place and thus was able to escape from it. I did not find any trouble at new slum as my neighbors have no idea about my conjugal life.*

## **Conclusion**

Deserted women in Bangladesh are placed in a deplorable condition and experience multifarious problems to continue their survival. Development projects frequently emphasis on destitute women and targeted them into programs but still now this segment of destitute women is exist in a miserable condition as their vulnerabilities are taken into less consideration by both the government and larger society. It goes without saying that desertion imposes particular challenges and disadvantages for the women as they are highly impoverished with very little or no access to both familial property and to social service schemes. Moreover, diversification of their employment options placed their economic condition in an utter impoverishment as they have to meet the whole demands of their larger family. As a result, very few possibilities of meeting their basic needs and hardship to rearing up their children. Societal stereotypical belief and bias against deserted women makes their struggle so difficult. They are always deprived and exploited both within family and in surroundings. So, it needs to take effective policies, strategies, programs and action plan to ensure a suitable environment for them and thus improve their living standard.

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