

The Sexual Exploitation of Women in America

A Comparison of Historical and Contemporary Cases from a Student's Perspective

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The social history of women in the United States offers the student a glimpse into the lives of women as they were throughout the past several centuries. Learning about the conditions of women's lives, the values and culture accepted and promoted by the society in which they lived can be difficult for the modern, twenty-first century, female student. Accepting an historical perspective, or the idea that we should not judge the customs, values and actions of people living in past with our modern values can be difficult. The modern female student will inevitably find the conditions in which many women lived and the belief systems advocated and accepted by American society in the past three to four centuries, not only ridiculous but deplorable. If one were to shed the proper historical perspective and allow judgment of past conditions and beliefs through a modern perspective one could easily condemn American society of the past as being misogynist, racist, unjust, ignorant and filled with instances of sexual exploitation and double sexual standards. The primary documents and scholarly research are filled with example after example to make the case.

After making such a case based on historical knowledge the following questions can be asked. If we should not judge yesterday's society by today's standards, how should we judge contemporary American society if those very same conditions are still in existence? Are slavery, sexual exploitation and unprosecuted rape alive and well in today's society? How will female students of future centuries judge the history of women's social conditions in the twenty first century? To borrow a couple of phrases, we may have *come a long way, baby*,¹ but *we are not the finished product*.² What conditions of women's lives existed in America's past that, by most modern standards accepted by most modern women would be considered appalling, unacceptable or simply unjust? What conditions of women's lives exist today, in America that would or should earn the same judgment?

The modern student taking a university class on women in American history might expect to learn about famous women who did extraordinary things or the customs and lives of women and the story of how those lives changed and evolved to include more opportunities and activities within the

1 Jim's Burnt Offerings, A Collection of Quaint Cigarette Packs, Boxes, Tins and Advertising. (2004). [online]. <http://www.wclynx.com/burntoofferings/>., Contents, You've Come a Long Way, Baby.

This phrase was coined by the advertising agency, Leo Burnett Advertising in 1968 as part of a campaign for Philip Morris promoting Virginia Slims cigarettes. The agency was attempting to capitalize on the feminist movement. The ads juxtaposed images evoking the lives of nineteenth century women with contemporary women, in modern dress. The phrase was used through the 1980's and became part of popular culture.

2 "We are not the finished product" is a phrase used by Dr. Sheryl De Leo, spoken to the students in her Women's History class taught at Tulane University College in Biloxi Mississippi in the spring of 2004. The phrase is meant as a reminder that women's history is not static or finished. We will be the subjects of future student's study.

workplace and public realm. While those expectations may be fulfilled, a student of social history exposed to the writings of such scholars as Christine Stansell and Catherine Clinton will find that the lives of women in America involved very difficult conditions and societal norms that promoted an attitude toward women that encouraged abuse and exploitation and often blamed the women themselves for the abuse. Two vastly different situations illustrate the point. Working women living in urban eighteenth century New York and women living within the slave system of the antebellum American South are illustrative of extreme conditions under which women lived. For the modern student these situations may be difficult to process or understand and the student may easily dismiss the history as a deplorable situation of the past, not to be seen today in modern America.

In City of Women,³ Christine Stansell gives a thorough view of women's lives in New York City in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. She focuses on the complicated role that sex and class played in the dynamics of women's lives. Stansell discusses attitudes of men toward women in the late eighteenth century at a time when some urban women were forming a working class culture that differed from the ideals of womanhood commonly held by many American men and women. Single women lived in the city, often without family and attempted to earn a living. Some were immigrants who hoped to fulfill the American dream of a better life. Some came from rural areas, hoping to escape country life or improve their economic condition.

The case of Henry Bedlow who was accused by Lanah Sawyer of rape illustrates the problems girls faced in this new culture where the presence of independent women challenged notions of women's proper role in society.⁴ Bedlow met Sawyer while out walking in the city. He introduced himself as Lawyer Smith and expressed a desire to see Sawyer again. During a subsequent encounter he took Sawyer on a tour of the Battery and bought her ice cream. Some time after midnight Bedlow insisted on being paid for his favors by having sex with her. They went to a bawdy house⁵ and had sex. Bedlow insisted that it was consensual. Sawyer contended that she was forced into the situation and was raped.

³ Stansell, C. (1987). City of Women, Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press

⁴ ibid., pg. 23-24.

⁵ ibid., pg. 14. A bawdy house was a residence used for gathering of people, usually for the consumption of alcohol and often as a place for sexual liaisons between prostitutes and their clients and other illicit affairs.

Stansell writes, “...republican ideas of government, authority and power supported already familiar justifications of sexual hierarchies.”⁶ The male dominated society of this time promoted and accepted that idea that women’s bodies, especially married women’s, were the property of men. The emerging class of independent women, who often walked alone in the city either out of necessity or desire to seek the entertainment afforded by their independent incomes, was seen as appropriate prey. One way to brutally summarize the view is to say that they were asking for whatever sexual aggressiveness that they ended up receiving. This attitude toward women exhibited itself in daily harassments of working women and girls as they walked to and from work. Young men would line up and hiss and curse at them as a form of entertainment.⁷

Men were seen as naturally sexual beings and marriage was viewed as a contract by which men offered financial means and security in exchange for domestic labor and rule over sexual activity. Women were seen to be naturally *passionate*,⁸ an attribute with negative connotations which produced in them the ability to lure and seduce men, trapping them and inviting sexual aggression from which men were somehow innocent from blame. Class also plays a role in these attitudes. Middle class women living in nice homes attempted to live up to the ideals of womanhood promoted at the times while the means to live by those standards were out of reach to working class, poor or immigrant women. Malicious motives were projected on non-middle class women living outside the standards of the middle class ideal woman.

Bedlow faced court charges for the rape of Sawyer. The defense used by his lawyers illustrates the prevailing attitudes toward working class girls. His lawyers ask, what possible reason other than illicit sex could a gentleman like Bedlow want with a lower class girl like Sawyer? She must have known that sex was the goal. Her testimony to the contrary is discredited by the mere fact that she is of the female sex, a sex that is capable of malicious motives and the entrapment of respectable men for the aim of the sexual gratification of their ever-present *passions*. The testimony of her female neighbors who attempt to stand up for her moral character is also discredited on the same grounds. They are female as well. They can’t be trusted. The lawyers contended that her

6 *ibid.*, pg. 23. The ideas about prevalent attitudes toward women is presented in full by Stansell in chapter 2, *The Problem of Dependency: Men and Women, Rich and Poor*, under the section headed: *Eve’s Daughter’s in the Republican City*.

7 *ibid.*, pg. 27.

8 *ibid.*, pg. 25.

passions led her to trick Bedlow into an immoral act and only by trickery was she able to present herself with the appearance of innocence. Bedlow was acquitted of the charges.⁹

The idea that women were naturally *passionate* was used by men to dismiss a variety of sexual acts, even ones perpetrated on children. Stansell writes of instances in which men accused of molesting children insist that these girls are capable of the same *passions* as older girls, deflecting the blame from themselves to the girls for being female.¹⁰

The story of Nancy Martin illustrates the point further. Martin met a man named Buchanan while out in New York. He expressed desire for her and with promises of marriage, a big house and servants convinced her to go with him, move into a house and have sex with him. After ten days Martin has misgivings and changed her mind. Buchanan refused to let her return home. Her parents elicited the help of Buchanan's friend, Wilson. Wilson refused to help and reinforced his friend's right to keep Martin. After all, she had had sex with him. She had compromised her virtue. Any misery she was experiencing was her own doing and could be compensated by a little money. Both Buchanan and Wilson failed to see any fault in the action.¹¹ Sexual relations with lower class women were sought after by men while seen as proof of their debauchery, maliciousness and desire to scheme against men in the game of heterosexual courtship and relations. In addition, sexual activity by a woman diminished her value and her claim to justice. Once her virtue was compromised she forfeited her right to choose her fate, to accuse her abuser or to be treated with any semblance of respect.

The modern reader of this tale and of other similar tales written by Stansell may undoubtedly be shocked by not only the actions of the men, but the justifications used for those actions and the validation given to their justifications by the prevailing attitudes of American society. While it is true, unfortunately that rapes still occur in this country, surely we have reached a point where the victim is no longer blamed based solely on her gender or class. Our modern society has at least accepted a woman's right to earn a living and to work in a variety of professions. Walking on a city street in working attire does not generally elicit jeers and hisses from middle class men. While a lengthy essay can be written about prevalent perverse attitudes about women's sexuality and

⁹ ibid., pg. 23-26

¹⁰ 10 ibid., pg. 25, additional discourse on male attitudes toward sexuality and children can be found in chapter 9, Women on the Town, Sexual Exchange and Prostitution, under the section titled, Girls.

¹¹ ibid., pg. 27-28.

continuing double standards, conditions in modern society are significantly better than those faced by such women as Martin and Sawyer. Certainly if the same arguments used by Bedlow's lawyers were used today, the public outcry would be tremendous. One brave woman did express outrage at the double standard of men in the eighteenth century after Bedlow was acquitted. Her letter to a local newspaper railed against the men who preyed upon women in the city. The response by the male public was a predictable attack on her credibility as a woman. The very fact that she dared to speak of such unseemly manners discredited her as a woman. By these standard, no one could legitimately speak against the rape of a girl.

In the second condition of women's lives we go from the urban life of the city to the lives of slave women living on the plantations of the South. Many Americans consider the inhumane institution of slavery that existed in the antebellum south as this country's great sin. Most students are aware of the evils involved in its history. Lacking from most discussions on slavery, which often focus on its economic aspects, is the sexual exploitation of slave women by their owners. To the modern student the tale of rape and forced breeding is shocking and deplorable. Catherine Clinton writes about the custom of sexual exploitation prevalent among southern white slave owners.¹² Clinton recounts the criticism of one slave owner's wife who expounded on the hypocrisies of the planter class culture that, on the one hand reviled black people as inferior and expressed repulsion at the very idea of black and white sexual unions and on the other hand maintained a tradition by which slave owners had illicit and often forced sex with their female slaves, sometimes maintaining two households, one with his wife and another with his slave concubine. Just as the lawyers who defended Bedlow degraded and attacked the morals of Sawyer in the case above, white southern critics of slavery often blamed the slaves themselves for the depravity of slavery. Slave women were viewed as naturally promiscuous, just as working-class women were blamed for their *passions*.

Accompanying a collection of essays on women's history is a document by Pauli Murray that recounts a story told to her by her grandmother who gives an account of the horror of sexual abuse on the plantation.¹³ Murray's grandmother heard the story from her mother, an ex-slave named

¹² Clinton, C. (1985) "Caught in the Web of the Big House: Women and Slavery," originally printed in: Fraser, W. et al., eds. *The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family, and Education*. Athens: University of Georgia Press., reprinted with permission in: Norton, M. B. and Alexander, R. M ed., 3rd edition., (2003). *Major Problems in American Women's History*. Lexington, MA and Toronto: D. C. Heath and Company., Chapter 6, Women and Slavery pg. 140.

¹³ Murray, P. (1956) *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family*. New York: Harper pg. 33-44., reprinted in: Norton, M. B. and Alexander, R. M ed., 3rd edition., (2003). *Major Problems in American Women's History*. Lexington, MA and Toronto: D. C. Heath and Company. Chapter 6, Women and Slavery., pg. 138.

Harriet. Harriet, an attractive girl of Native American and Caucasian decent, belonged to a doctor with two sons. The sons returned to their father's plantation after college to practice law in their hometown. They both immediately set their sights on Harriet. When the owner's wife realized their intentions she tried to persuade her husband to prevent what she feared was to come. According to the story, the owner simply replied that the boys needed "to sow a few wild oats and they'd get over it."¹⁴ Eventually, one of the brothers trapped and brutally raped the young slave girl repeatedly over the course of several weeks. No one stopped him or helped the slave despite her fierce screams and attempts to prevent the attack by nailing her door shut. The brutality only ended when the second brother attacked the first, presumably out of jealousy, and severely beat him. Harriet bore the planter's son's child.

In the context of the slave system, female victims of such abuse were powerless. There was no possible recourse for these women. While the white, male, planter class may have accepted the practice of sexual abuse, it was viewed with deep anger and bitterness by the slaves themselves and often by the white women of the planter family. White women, too were powerless to stop their husbands from committing adultery with his slaves and often faced the humiliation of having her husband's illegitimate children and sex partner (rape victim, concubine or both) part of her everyday life. For the white planter man who engaged in such activity, no family or Christian obligations could bridle his sexual activity.

Students of women's history, male and female, white and black, read of such brutality with disgust. Some contemporary white southerners and history buffs attempt to provide some sense of justification or understanding to the enslavement of Africans by Americans by offering explanations of the economic system on which it was based and encouraging the student to look at the subject with an historical perspective.¹⁵ Slavery, in fact is not an American south phenomenon. It has existed throughout time and history, though not often based solely on race.¹⁶ Such apologists cite the humane treatment of slaves by some slave owners as part of an attempt to understand and by some, justify the actions of the southern planter class. No amount of historical perspective can aid in understanding or justifying the inhumane brutality of sexual exploitation exacted upon slave women

¹⁴ ibid., This quote is not known to be direct from the slave owner but is a direct quote from the text.

¹⁵ The War for States Rights. (2004). [online]., <http://civilwar.bluegrass.net/index.html>., see Slavery and Emancipation, Slave Uprisings, Biblical Defense of Slavery and Slave Trade, and Secession Crisis

¹⁶ Chronology of the History of Slavery and Racism. (2004). [online]., <http://www.innecity.org/holt/slavechron.html>

by their masters. If the white men themselves did not recognize the immorality of their actions, the slaves themselves did, as did many white women and critics of slavery.

The cases of the victims of rape and sexual exploitation in eighteenth century New York City may leave the student of history with some disturbing similarities to contemporary society. The tales of abuse from slavery in the south, however, surely can have no similarities in contemporary American society. Slavery was abolished over a hundred years ago. The very idea that a person could be considered the property of another, to be used for labor or sexual pleasure at his or her owner's whim is unthinkable in modern American society. If any man were to attempt to revive the practice of slavery he would not only face the contempt and rage of the American public but he would certainly face prosecution by the law. The modern student of history may be shocked to find out that such slavery indeed exists today. In fact, according to a story by Peter Landesman published in the New York Times, a growing worldwide sex slave trade flourishes today, with traffickers, customers and so-called safe havens where young girls are stored for use is existent in the major metropolitan cities of the United States.¹⁷

Knowledge of the existence of a sex-slave trade is not new. In fact according to Landsman's article, the product of years of extensive research and interviewing of girls and women who were victims of the trade, President Bush called for tougher measures against such a trade in a speech before the United Nations General Assembly in November of 2003. He called on the governments of nations within which the trade exists to clamp down on the traffickers of this horrible trade. The speech implied that this is a problem of international scale, but not necessarily an American one. Kevin Bales, president of an organization called Free the Slaves estimates in Landsman's article that as many as thirty to fifty thousand sex slaves are in captivity in the United States at any given time.

If a modern history student is horrified over the treatment of women slaves by white masters as chronicled in historical essays and documents, then Landsman's tale of extreme sexual abuse and the scale at which this slave trade is being conducted will certainly shock and horrify the reader to an even greater degree. The details of the trade and the methods used by traffickers and kidnappers is beyond the comprehension of the average student and the graphic details of the horrors in which the victims undergo will be left out of this discussion.

¹⁷ All information about the sex slave trade is from: Landesman, P. (2004) The Girls Next Door. New York Times., January 25, 2004., late ed., section 6., pg. 30 column 1., also found at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/25/magazine/25SEXTRAFFIC.html?>

The traffic ring works by preying on the desperation and poverty of girls of foreign countries who, like the immigrants of the eighteenth century, dream of a better life in the United States. For some the entire process is based on their innocence of intent and empty promises of their captors. They are promised jobs as nannies, actresses, models or waitresses in Paris restaurants. In many cases they are even coaxed into paying their own airfare as a down payment on a better life. For some the possibility that prostitution may be part of the deal is apparent. However, Landsman writes that for these women, the concept of a prostitute's life is based on movies like *Pretty Woman*.¹⁸ The reality that awaits them is far more horrific. Just as working class women of the eighteenth century were often lured by what they thought was legitimate courtship and promises of marriage, the prey of sex slave traffickers are sometimes courted by traffickers and promised marriage and better a happier life in America, only to find themselves in Mexico, abandoned by their suitors.

Landsman's article chronicles in gruesome detail the method of the trafficking system, which includes repeated physical, sexual and psychological abuse of girls as they are conditioned for service in the United States. The entire tale is shocking, but one of the most shocking aspects is the prevalence of children for use as sex slaves. One victim's tale begins when she is four and continues well into her teenage years. These children are sexually abused in Mexico in preparation for the move into the States and into *safe* houses. Law enforcement and boarder patrol are often part of the scheme and aid in the trafficking. Landsman recounts a victim's testimony that policemen, clergy and even child psychologists were among the customers of the sex trade services. Just as slave women in the south were powerless in their condition, these girls have no one to trust and no one to turn to. This is in the United States of America in 2004! Victims are discouraged from attempting to escape by threats of retribution against their family members back home and certain physical abuse or death, if caught. Many of these girls are from areas of the world where such threats are carried out every day. Class plays a large part in the victimization of these girls. Poverty is a common denominator and white girls are valued more than dark skinned ones. Darker skinned girls are deemed more disposable and are subject to horrific abuses by customers, sometimes resulting in death.

Landsman describes places that his investigation led him to in the United States. In middle class houses in nice neighborhoods, blocks from churches, with American flags draped along the

¹⁸ [Pretty Woman](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100405/) is a 1990 movie starring Julia Roberts and Richard Gere in which a prostitute falls in love with a well-paying client who takes her away to a better life at the end of the movie. See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100405/> for a synopsis.

streets are houses where sex slaves are held captive, as much captives as any African in any slave trade ship ever was. There they are poorly fed, provided with inadequate sanitary or sleeping conditions while they await their use as objects of abuse by American men. Houses like this exist today in neighborhoods of such cities as New York, Los Angeles and Chicago.

The sheer horror and brutality of the situation may cause one to question why no swift and decisive action has been taken against the existence of such barbarism in this country. As we have seen with other related issues of sex and class and its relations to attitudes toward women and women's sexuality, here too it hampers a clear understanding of the situation. Often, the existence of these girls is seen as a problem of prostitution or of illegal immigration. A group of foreign girls living in poor conditions together in one house is not necessarily cause for great alarm by law enforcement, much less evidence of a sex slave trade. Similarly, a young, poor, immigrant woman caught having sex with a man for money in a big city is not necessarily cause for shock or alarm.

The attitudes of eighteenth and nineteenth century American culture viewed any woman who engaged in any kind of sexual activity outside of marriage as a prostitute, immoral and without virtue.¹⁹ A separate discussion could be expounded on prostitution itself and the extent to which it is a profession of choice or a desperate measure of women in extreme and difficult circumstances. Absent such a discussion, it can be said that women who choose to prostitute themselves have been in the past and are today considered, tainted, immoral and absent of respectable middle class values. This attitude helps to explain why the sex slave trade in the United States is not a priority for law enforcement. It involves prostitution where the line between consensual sex for money and rape is often blurred and difficult to distinguish.

Landsman makes the distinction between prostitution, the decision by some women to exchange sexual favors or activity for material gain of some kind, which is **not** what these girls are engaged in and sexual slavery, the use of these girls as slaves, chattel owned and used by their captors as objects of sexual abuse of the worst kind for their profit. Because prostitution is seen as something done by choice, it is difficult for law enforcement to recognize the difference and prosecute the perpetrators of this horror, despite the fact that it is a crime that relies on at least some knowledge of its existence by some faction of the American public.

19 Stansell, C. (1987). *City of Women, Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press., pg.175*

Another reason for the lack of action or outcry by the American public or law enforcement is the nature of the subject itself. Norton and Alexander's collection of essays contains descriptions of the suffrage movement in America. Public meetings, rallies, picnics, dances and nighttime events were held with women and children carrying yellow lanterns and live music contributing to a festive atmosphere, all in the name of giving women the right to vote.²⁰ While this was a radical idea to many it was not so repugnant as to be excluded from discussion in either polite society or public streets. Decades later, a movement whose aim was to promote effective, readily available birth control to married women found that the very subject itself prevented effective campaigning. To speak of birth control, one must inevitably speak of sex, a subject taboo in most private settings, more so in public arenas.²¹ The subject of a sex slave trade involving the demonic abuse of not only young women and teenage girls but also of young children as small as toddlers takes the inappropriateness to the a degree unimaginable by early twentieth century promoters of birth control. It is not a nice subject to talk about. The girls involved are foreign, poor and often victims of extreme sexual abuse. It is not a problem of white, middle class America, though its customers often are. It does not lend itself to public discussion.

Peter Landsman published his article in January of 2004. Following its appearance in the New York Times, he was interviewed by Terri Gross on the nationally aired radio program, *Fresh Air*,²² which is broadcast by National Public Radio. Before the publication of the article he made an appearance on CNN's morning news program, *American Morning* where Soledad O'Brien reacted in perfect disgust to his story before moving on to the next subject.²³ At the time of the writing of this discussion, we are a country at war. American civilians have recently been attacked in Iraq; their bodies mutilated and hung from a bridge by an Iraqi mob. We have a national presidential election

20 Norton, M. B. and Alexander, R. M ed., 2nd edition. (1996). Major Problems in American Women's History. Lexington, MA and Toronto: D. C. Heath and Company., Chapter 10, The "New Woman" Suffrage and Social Reform., pg. 253-284

21 Bissell, M. (1925) "Report of the Eastern Pennsylvania Branch of the American Birth Control League, 1924-1925" printed in: Sanger M. ed. (1925). International Aspects of Birth Control. New York: American Birth Control League., pg. 167-171., reprinted in: Norton, M. B. and Alexander, R. M ed., 3rd edition., (2003). Major Problems in American Women's History. Lexington, MA and Toronto: D. C. Heath and Company., Chapter 11, Sexuality and Marriage in Modern America.

22 Fresh Air. (2004). [online]. http://freshair.npr.org/day_fa.jhtml?displayValue=day&todayDate=01/26/2004 ..., The interview aired on January 26, 2004.

23 CNN Transcripts. (2004). [online]. <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0401/23/ltn.14.html>., The interview aired January 23, 2004 on the CNN news program. American Morning.

coming up in November. The Commission investigating the attacks of 9/11 has just completed a round of public hearings including intriguing and damaging testimony by a former White House insider and the country awaits the testimony of National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice. Perhaps it is expecting too much that Landsman's story should warrant any more attention than it was given.

For a student immersed in the history of the conditions of women's lives, a student who finds herself shocked and disgusted by the extent to which women endured racist, misogynistic, and sexually exploitative conditions within a society whose very values encouraged and reinforced such conditions, the news that slavery is alive and well today, in the United States is cause for great alarm. Using commonly held beliefs and the mainstream value system of modern American society one can easily condemn American society of the past. If that is so, how much more should we condemn the conditions existent in American society today that are equally, if not horribly more deplorable than any that existed in our past?

The examples presented in this discussion are a small sampling of the many similar stories involving similar conditions of women's lives throughout history. One can argue, that scholars such as Stansell are presented the student with a view of the extremes of American society and the fringes of activity. Certainly, there were women who lived happy, complete lives in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Similarly, Landsman's article is not one about the prevalent American culture and its treatment of women. It is an extreme case, on the fringes of society. However, it is important for the modern student to learn about and realize how difficult and complicated issues of sexuality, gender, class and independence were for women in American society throughout history. Students often study history not only to learn facts about the past but to also understand the present and perhaps even prevent mistakes of the past from reoccurring. While such lessons are often difficult and illusive, sometimes it is a simple matter of black and white. Slavery, rape and sexual exploitation of girls and women are wrong. It was wrong in the seventeenth century and it's wrong today. If the modern student is disturbed by the stories of the sexual exploitation of women in America's past, then that shock can find a home in the articles of today's newspapers. Before we dismiss stories from America's past as illustrative of behaviors and attitudes that we, as a society have moved beyond or that we, as women have fought our way out of, we should examine the conditions of all women living in America today. Conditions of sexual exploitation, attitudes that

promote the objectification of women and girls and even sexual slavery exist in American society today. We have come a long way, but we can only hope that we are indeed not the finished product.

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