

Gender Equality and Inclusion in the Fisheries Sector in Asia: Issue Analysis and Recommendations

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I. Introduction

RTI International is the primary contractor for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/ Regional Development Mission for Asia (RDMA) Sustainable Fish Asia (SUFIA) Local Capacity Development (LCD) Activity. As a part of the SUFIA LCD Activity, RTI researched and developed a Gender Equity and Social Inclusion Assessment as well as a corresponding Gender and Inclusive Development Action Plan (GIDAP). With USAID/RDMA concurrence, RTI is making the sector research publicly available as this publication: *Gender Equality and Inclusion in the Fisheries Sector in Asia*.

The purpose of this publication is to provide a general overview of the current situation and issues surrounding gender and social inclusion in the fisheries sector in the Southeast Asian (SEA) and Coral Triangle (CT) regions. With the COVID-19 pandemic changing the way things are being done to adhere to proper health and safety protocols, special attention was given to how the industry is responding to these changes in a gender-sensitive and socially inclusive way.

Three terms, which we define below, are used extensively in this document and are core integrated elements of the SUFIA Activity:

Gender Equality: concerns women and men, including working with men and boys, women, and girls to bring about changes in attitudes, behaviors, roles, and responsibilities at home, in the workplace, and in the community (USAID 2020).

Gender Equity: means fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different, but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations, and opportunities (UNICEF 2017).

Social Inclusion: the process by which the terms of participation in society are improved, and efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities, particularly for those who are disadvantaged, to achieve full potential in life (providing access to resources, giving the marginalized a voice, respecting their rights), and leaving no one behind (UN 2016).

The **goal** of the SUFIA Activity is to improve the management of marine biodiversity and fisheries resources in the Asia-Pacific region by reducing unsustainable and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The main **objective** of this activity is to provide USAID/RDMA with services that include: (1) conducting organizational capacity assessments and providing capacity development services for two regional fishery support organization, and (2) leading a private-sector landscape assessment and brokering investment opportunities for fishing industry businesses to invest in our partner organizations and sustainable fishing in the Asia-Pacific region. The SUFIA LCD Activity expects the following **results**: (Intermediate Result [IR]1) Strengthened leadership and capacity of regional institutions for improved fisheries management; (IR2) Strengthened regional multistakeholder platforms for improved fisheries management, compliance, and enforcement; and (IR3) Increased industry investments in fair-labor and sustainable fishing practices.

II. Regional and Industry Context in Relation to Gender

The Asia-Pacific region has the highest marine biodiversity on the planet and is home to more than one-third of the world's coral reefs. This region is also the world's largest producer of seafood, from both aquaculture and open sea fishing. Most of the fish produced are consumed/ marketed both domestically and globally, while there are some that are for subsistence especially in small-scale fisheries. The fishing sector provides work

for more than 22 million people (many of whom are migrant workers) and contributes to food security and nutrition to more than 4 billion people in the region. Increasing pressures for fishing productivity and profitability may harm the region's delicate aquatic ecosystems, reduce biodiversity, and deplete the stocks of available marine life. This would reduce economic opportunity and lower nutrition for residents throughout the Asia-Pacific.

Consumption of fish and other seafood is encouraged as these foods have diverse and high nutritional value, which can help reduce malnutrition and provide a more balanced diet, rather than increase dependence on high-calorie and low-micronutrient diets (FAO 2020). However, efforts to increase production and yield through technological innovation may also result in inequitable distribution of these food resources as technological advances may not be accessible to marginal and vulnerable groups, such as women (Farmery et al., 2021).

Fisheries should consider the whole value chain, from capture and production, transformation (i.e., fish/seafood processing in various forms), to marketing and trading. Ancillary services and enablers (institutions) should also be included. In this way, we look at all the people involved in various fisheries activities, primarily with a gender lens, and then with consideration of the intersectional factors (age, race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, etc.) that influence the way they think, make decisions, act, and interact with others. Whereas fishing activities at sea employ primarily male workers in large scale fishing operations, there are small-scale fishing activities where women are also going out to sea or collecting and fishing from the shore for food.

USAID, drawing upon available literature and program experience, has identified four broad threats to marine biodiversity in the Asia-Pacific region: (1) climate change; (2) marine and land pollution (i.e., nutrients, plastics, noise); (3) destructive development (e.g., ports, aquaculture, unsustainable tourism); and (4) fishing-related threats, including IUU fishing. SUFIA focuses primarily on the fourth threat of IUU fishing, for which mitigation is hampered by deficiencies with multilateral national arrangements, poor management and monitoring of fisheries management areas, and lack of country-level deterrence for fishing violations.

Torre et al. (2019) reported that while gender equality and inclusion are improving in other sectors, there remains much to be desired in the coastal and fisheries resources management space. They reported that women's and young girls' contributions to the fisheries sector are generally unrecognized or undervalued, despite them having diverse roles and responsibilities within the sector. This results in lower opportunities for women to participate in decision-making, namely in governance and economic issues that impact them. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization reported that based on several gender studies, women are often the most disadvantaged in the seafood industry, as they assumed roles that were unstable and low paid (FAO 2020).

In the fisheries context, women are more marginalized than men, thus many country policies and development programs prioritize women's equity efforts. In the Asia-Pacific region, where most societies are patriarchal, women and girls are almost always at a disadvantage, not only in fisheries but also in other aspects of their lives. According to Asia Indigenous People Pact Foundation, women (particularly indigenous women) face triple discrimination based on their ethnicity, gender, and class. This has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (AIPPF-NIWA 2020).

Recent findings by Mangubhai and Lawless (2021) reiterated that women continue to be at the receiving end of inequality as their work, their contributions are undervalued, and they are underrepresented in fisheries management and development. The authors suggested that small-scale fisheries approaches should be more gender inclusive, aiming not only to reach women but also to benefit, empower, and transform their lives. In talking about

fisheries, it is important not only to focus on commercial, large-scale fisheries operations, which are dominated by men, but to also consider small-scale fisheries which are characterized by subsistence and low value activities and dominated by women. This is particularly prevalent in the Asia-Pacific region, where most seafood is produced i.e., mainly from fishing/capture and aquaculture.

III. Method and Key Findings

Methodology

This report aims to address one specific research question: How are gender equality and social inclusion understood and addressed within the fisheries sector in the Asia-Pacific? The research for this report was conducted primarily through desk studies and analysis of relevant recent literature. The SUFIA team also spoke with leadership of regional fishery support organizations about these issues. The responses to our questions contributed to the content, synthesis, and analysis contained in the assessment.

Industry Statistics

Based on an FAO report in 2020, 14% of the nearly 60 million people engaged in the fisheries and aquaculture sector are women. Primary pre-processing activities (harvesting, collecting, gleaning, sorting, and cleaning) is largely concentrated in developing countries, with 85% of the workers in Asia. Most seafood workers in Asia are artisanal fishers or work in some form of aquaculture. FAO reports that when supporting industries such as post-harvest cleaning, packaging, and selling are included, almost 50% of workers are women. In summary, men largely do open sea harvest and cultivation, while women are more involved in post-harvest seafood work. The reason for this is largely traditional and cultural, as women have been discouraged from working on boats (Torre et al. 2019; USAID Oceans 2018a; 2018b).

Workforce management is also important to consider for the sustainability of the industry. For example, in Thailand, the fishing and seafood industry relies heavily on migrant workers, with most coming from neighboring countries. While Thailand has worked to address issues relating to human trafficking, forced labor, and other labor abuse, it is still an ongoing challenge due to labor exploitation in the informal sector. The EU-ILO Ship to Shore Rights Project baseline research on seafood workers in Thailand revealed persistent labor abuse specifically in payment of wages, disparity in wages between men (73% receiving minimum wage or more) and women (only 48% receiving minimum wage or more), unethical recruitment, withholding of identity documents, and abusive working conditions (ILO 2018). According to EJF (2019), despite Thailand's ratification of the two major international agreements for fisheries worker rights (the ILO Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labor Convention and the Work in Fishing Convention 2007), migrant workers in Thailand continue to be vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and forced labor if they are not provided with adequate social and economic protection. For example, the local labor law still does not allow migrant workers to form or participate in labor unions.

While much of the onus for fair labor standards falls on governments, private sector fishing industry players should also be held accountable for abuses against fisheries workers, particularly migrants. For example, the recommendations given by EJF (2013) in its report, *Sold to the Sea*, only had two recommendations to the private sector against a long list for national governments and the international community. Overall, a change in mindsets of all stakeholders is necessary to control these abuses against humanity and uphold the basic human rights of every worker.

Gender and Social Inclusion Issues in Fisheries

In 2015, FAO released the *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication* (VGSSF). These Guidelines provided "research and recommendations to support responsible fisheries and sustainable social and economic development for the benefit of current and future generations". VGSSF focuses on small-scale fishers and fish workers and their related activities. The guidelines pay special attention to the needs and accommodations of vulnerable and marginalized people and recommend a human rights-based approach in the development of this sector. The VGSSF guiding principles include human rights and dignity, respect for different cultures, nondiscrimination, gender equality and equity, consultation and participation, holistic and integrated approaches, and social responsibility, among others. These principles align with USAID/RDMA GESI principles and provide a strong entry point when working with small-scale fisheries. The guidelines also promote social development, employment, and decent work conditions. FAO's recommendations covered the entire fisheries value chain - from production and capture to processing, marketing, and trade.

These FAO guidelines, however, are voluntary, and FAO member and non-member countries are encouraged to interpret and apply the guidelines according to their national legal systems and institutions. FAO worked with SEAFDEC and other regional stakeholders in Southeast Asia to contextualize the application of VGSSF. As a result, SEAFDEC, its member country representatives, and other regional support organizations supported production of country-specific operational guidelines as well as some region-wide operational standards. Currently FAO is piloting the VGSSF guidelines in the Philippines and Indonesia.

VGSSF acknowledges that fishing industry development in the Asia and Pacific region often overlooks the involvement of women in leadership positions such as policymaking, academics, and business leaders. Much of the public assumes that fishing is a male domain (Barclay et al. 2019; Torre et al. 2019; USAID Oceans 2018a; 2018b). Because women predominantly work in seafood processing and packaging – most government and donor projects focus attention on GESI issues on this node of the fishing industry value chain. Ethnic minorities in fishing communities often end up as low paid labor. Minority and indigenous women typically face a doubling of challenges (Hoare 2011).

International Instruments on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

All member countries of SEAFDEC and CTI-CFF have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), although implementation among countries varies. National, regional, and international gender equality agreements and decent work guidelines (such as CEDAW, Beijing Declaration 1995 on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls, International Labor Organization Anti-Harassment, Sustainable Development Goals, etc.) exist but the extent to which national fisheries agencies follow them has not been studied. In many cases CEDAW implementation and evaluation is done by labor and social development ministries and few fisheries agencies have incorporated GESI considerations in fisheries policy or practices.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has developed several instruments for work and labor protection. Two of them are the ILO Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labor Convention, 1930 (P29), and the Work in Fishing Convention 2007 (C188). The latter applies to all fishers and fishing vessels engaged in commercial fishing operations. C188 intends to safeguard and improve the working conditions of crew on board fishing vessels, including their lodging and welfare packages. Only 18 countries have ratified C188 so far, with Thailand the only Asian country to do so (in 2019). Thailand's decision to ratify C188 was met with vocal protest from the private sector, but the Thai government was committed to increasing labor protections for both Thai and migrant workers, including eliminating forced

labor. Thailand is one of the world's top seafood producers and exporters, employing more than 600,000 workers in 2017 for both the fishing and seafood processing sectors, more than 50% of them were registered migrant workers (ILO 2019). The number of unregistered migrant workers in the seafood industry is not known.

To comply with these international agreements, countries have incorporated them into national policy and legislation. Mangubhai (2019) suggests that corresponding policy, laws, and executive orders should use an inclusive process to ensure they are contextualized for each country's specific social-cultural situation. There also remains a lack of instruments to oversee and evaluate the implementation of the agreements. This could be a role for civil society, industry, or academia.

Research, Resources and Private Sector Initiatives

The Pacific Community (SPC) has a *Gender Equity and Social Inclusion Handbook*, which is designed to provide guidance to improve GESI in coastal fisheries and aquaculture particularly for fisheries staff in Pacific Island countries, three of which are members of CTI-CFF (Barclay et al., 2019). SPC has published a *Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin* since 1997, although women in fisheries still struggle despite the high involvement of women in the sector in the Pacific (Williams 2014). This is partly due to the traditional customary practices that discriminate against them, particularly in terms of restricted control over land and involvement in natural resources management (Graham and D'Andrea 2021). A recent SPC bulletin (March 2021) looked at the impacts of COVID-19 as well as other disasters on coastal communities in which women and girls were most affected.

Recently, the USAID/RDMA Asia Counter-Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) project released a toolkit for the integration of GESI into counter-trafficking programming (Winrock 2020). Since some of the major factors that exacerbate IUU fishing are labor related (poor work conditions, abuse, non- or under-payment, and human trafficking, among others) – this toolkit is useful for fishery sector stakeholders in their work. Labor issue impact both men (in fishing vessels, farms, and informal labor) and women (farms, pre-processing and processing plants, and informal labor).

The Asian Fisheries Society, a fisheries and aquaculture professional society, has a Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries (GAF) Section that focuses on gender issues in fisheries and aquaculture (https://www.genderaquafish.org/). The members are mainly academics and experts and they provide research and information for policymakers and fisheries practitioners.

Gender studies of the fisheries sector have flourished and are conducted by international organizations, regional entities, and country-level civil society organizations and universities. Most of this research reflects what we have already noted in this analysis: women are often assigned the most unstable roles and poorly paid positions—most often in the secondary sector—and are under-recognized as contributors and decision makers in the fishing industry. The gender analysis conducted by USAID Oceans and Fisheries Partnership in Indonesia and the Philippines provided an overview of the gender situation reflected in other member countries as well (USAID Oceans 2018a; 2018b).

Initiatives to empower women in the fisheries and aquaculture are also becoming more common. For example, the International Organization for Women in the Seafood Industry (WSI) (https://womeninseafood.org/) is working with private sector actors to produce materials that advocate for increasing women's access to control of situations that affect them. WSI's monitoring study (done annually) on the status of women in top management in seafood companies continues to advocate for the sector to pay attention to gender inequalities and imbalances (WSI 2020). Private sector entities frequently use corporate

social responsibility initiatives to address GESI, primarily focused first on their employees and their families, with some outreach to the communities. However, GESI advocacy among private-sector entities in the fisheries sector remains relatively low.

Since 1997, GESI has been a component of the UN corporate social responsibility reports, which also include social and governance indicators for corporate sustainability. The GRI Standards are the world's most-used common indicators for corporate sustainability reporting developed by the Global Reporting Initiative, an independent international organization that help businesses take responsibility for their impacts. Since 2010, the United Nations (UN) launched the Women's Empowerment Principles, which was an initiative of the UN Global Compact and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to get companies to focus more on GESI, and especially on gender considerations. However, it was voluntary and most companies from most sectors were not making clear progress on their actions toward ensuring human rights, including GESI. Thus, after the introduction of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in 2011 (which was the first global standard for preventing and addressing the risk of adverse impacts on human rights linked to business activities and it provide the companies with a clear framework), most companies report on GESI activities and progress within their business and human rights action plans, sometimes as a standalone human rights report or as part of their corporate sustainability and CSR report.

Specifically, within the fisheries and seafood sector only a few of the leading global seafood producers report on GESI publicly or as part of their ongoing global human rights action plans or corporate sustainability (social indicators) plans. In 2015, Nestlé was the first company to publicly report specifically about what it was doing to address the labor exploitation in its fish and seafood supply chain in Thailand (Bangkok Post 2015). Since then, its peers such as Thai Union, Mars Petcare (https://www.mars.com/about/policies-and-practices/human-rights-policy), and CP Group have also published their human rights action plans and activities. For example, Mars Petcare integrates GESI into its Thai Fish Supply Chain Human Rights Action Plan as it works with local authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and suppliers to tackle labor exploitation in their supply chains, but it does not specifically mention GESI terminology. Mars Petcare does consider GESI in their work, though it is not specifically referred to as GESI but as "human rights" broadly for the public (P. Sakulpitakphon, pers. Comm).

In the Pacific, the National Fisheries Development (NFD) and its sister company SolTuna, in Solomon Islands have declared its support to the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) GESI Initiative. FFA is the biggest fishing organization in the Pacific, currently headed by a woman, Director General Dr. Manu Tupou-Roosen. One of the key goals of FFA's GESI initiative is to give women and minority groups a broader range of roles in the fisheries sector, beyond working in canneries. FFA GESI strategies include collecting GESI-disaggregated data, incorporating a GESI lens into events and activities, and integrating GESI into its policies, practices, and procedures. This includes, for example, producing job descriptions that will make it possible for women and those from less represented groups to apply, posting job advertisements in accessible places, and better recruitment targeting for jobs across the fisheries value chain (Toito'ona 2020).

The International Labor Organization (ILO) initiated a holistic, multifaceted, and integrated program, entitled *Global Action Program Against Forced Labor and Trafficking of Fishers at Sea* (GAPfish) to address the growing concern of forced labor and human trafficking in the fishing sector. The EU-funded the *ILO Ship to Shore Rights Project*, implemented in 2016.

However, more work can be done to promote GESI approaches and terminology in the fishing industry, including as part of the sector's broader human rights initiatives. New efforts could include further educating the private sector in GESI concepts and the benefits

of GESI approaches, integrating GESI into companies' public reporting, and encouraging leadership to prioritize GESI approaches and activities across companies.

IV. Issue Analysis and Recommendations

Based on the information from our desk study and additional interviews with partners and other stakeholders, a preliminary analysis of the status of GESI integration and implementation in fisheries is summarized below.

Issue Analysis

Ample International Commitments and Resources for GESI Exist. In general, there is no lack in the number of guidelines and instruments for GESI in the Asia Pacific region, but there are only a few that are focused on fisheries, with FAO's VGSSF being one such example. These instruments are available to the countries to guide them in GESI integration; however, there is not enough information on whether the countries are able to implement them effectively. The SUFIA LCD team concluded that there is a need for stronger information dissemination on these instruments as well as proof of compliance of the countries that are signatories to them, particularly on the CEDAW. In addition, building capacity for a deeper understanding of the concepts and developing skills for implementation at various levels and within different sectors are basic steps to ensure implementation. Concrete actions on GESI implementation and developing a culture of practice are also necessary and stakeholders need to be oriented and trained on these issues.

Social Norms and Cultural Traditions May Adversely Impact GESI Adoption. Whereas social norms and cultural traditions should not be a reason to violate the rights of a person, regardless of gender or social status, such discrimination is still being practiced. However, we found that there is a need for a deeper anthropological understanding of cultural nuances to overcome the barriers to adoption. Constructive engagement that includes men and boys in any GESI training, discussion, and policy advocacy is a good strategy to overcome some of these traditions and norms.

There are several interconnected and complex factors that contribute to the barriers of GESI adoption. A convergence of social norms, cultural traditions, and the psychology and emotions tied to "identity" and acceptance of "change" are combined in various ways to reinforce discrimination or exclusion of women or vulnerable groups. Some people are resistant to change if it is seen as a threat to their traditions and identity. For example, in Thailand, under the 1999 Education for All Policy and 2005 Cabinet Resolution on Education for Unregistered Persons, every child is entitled to 15 years of free education regardless of their legal status or nationality. The Thai government has allowed children of migrant workers, including those of migrant fishers and seafood workers, to attend public elementary schools following the adoption of this policy and resolution; however, many communities and local schools resisted this effort.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Thailand reported that approximately 200,000 migrant children are still not in school due to lingering negative attitudes toward migrant children, lack of understanding of policies, and lack of capacity in the schools to adequately support migrant children (UNICEF 2019). The negative attitudes were a combination of discrimination rooted in historical stereotypes that saw migrant children as burdens for Thai taxpayers and diminished the migrant worker's valuable contribution to the Thai economy. Many people also did not understand the issues surrounding children's rights. In 2016, Save the Children orchestrated a campaign in Thailand to address the negative attitudes and misinformation surrounding the issue of migrant children. Charoen Pokphand (C.P.) Group, Thailand's largest conglomerate, and Labour Protection Network (LPN), an NGO that works with

migrant workers in the seafood sector, formed a partnership in 2016 to provide children of migrant workers with scholarships, school uniforms, support services, school supplies, food, and medical supplies (including masks in 2020) (Bangkok Post 2021).

Working with other sectors such as the Education Sector and Media and Entertainment could also help to ensure GESI learning and culture is imbedded even at a young age among school children and students, as well as viewers and readers of mass media. This could mean a review of curricula in schools and universities, outreach and collaboration with educational institutions during school events, and identifying champions in society who can communicate and embody the GESI concepts.

There Are Modest Opportunities to Engage Private Sector Allies to Support GESI. As noted earlier, GESI activities initiated or implemented by the private sector are limited, and there is a lack of information about them. This may mean that GESI is not a priority in the private sector and that it is buried under competing priorities, such as focusing on sustainable operations, expanding business, and reaching new markets. What limited GESI information we found was located in the reports of international organizations that may have worked on specific initiatives for women or found in the CSR or sustainability reports of leading companies, under their social, diversity and inclusion, or human rights commitments. This presents a good opportunity for fishery support organizations to explore and pursue private-sector engagement activities or project initiatives or in developing customized mini-projects for GESI mainstreaming. In SUFIA's private-sector engagement survey, we asked participants to voluntarily provide some basic data regarding their gender, sexual identity, ethnic minority, and age group. We also asked each stakeholder group whether developing activities to ensure the empowerment of women and youth was of interest. Based on responses to-date, all stakeholders have an interest in working on the empowerment of women and youth. It is yet to be determined in what specific project, but discussions have focused on strengthening women's and youth's capability to improve entrepreneurial skills, fisheries data management skills, and education opportunities.

Initiatives from the social impact investing space have advocated and promoted gender lens investing, spearheaded by the Global Impact Investing Network (GIIN) in 2017–2019 (https://thegiin.org/). The GIIN initiative supported impact investors to actively integrate a gender lens strategy into their investment portfolio. Its recent focus is to support those most vulnerable to COVID-19 impact, by which the fishing sector has also been greatly affected. However, the GIIN has not stated whether it has specific work in the fisheries and marine resources sectors.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this GESI assessment, the following recommendations are suggested for possible interventions, with the aim to improve the GESI practices within the SUFIA LCD partner organizations and in the fisheries sector throughout the region.

- Support regional fishery support organizations in the completion of GESI policies and in developing operational guidelines.
- Provide targeted consulting and coaching to promote awareness and equip SEAFDEC and CTI-CFF and some of their fisheries sector partners with skills to implement GESI within their organizations and in their programming, including a training of trainers for GESI.
- Organize webinars and develop training modules in GESI in fisheries and for different groups (e.g., leaders/executives, development workers, youth). SUFIA LCD can also support SEAFDEC and CTI-CFF to conduct GESI sessions specifically for the private sector as well.
- Our SUFIA team will join partner CTI-CFF Women Leaders' Forum Working Group to

better understand issues and identify areas the project can offer support.

- Produce GESI knowledge products and communication materials in the context of fisheries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, including using social media for messaging campaigns, advocacy, and information dissemination within the organizations and externally (multi-language).
- Conduct outreach to fisheries communities to demonstrate GESI implementation (SEAFDEC and CTI-CFF in collaboration with the private sector). This will provide an opportunity for the fisheries organizations and the private sector to work together and learn from the experience. In addition to raising awareness and training on GESI, this could also involve SEAFDEC and CTI-CFF in providing their technical expertise to train the private sector on areas that they need building up skills on. This could be based on feedback from the field and depending on the COVID-19 situation.

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