

Article

## Migrant women in Italy between exclusion and active participation. A gender perspective in inclusion processes

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**Abstract.** The article exposes some of the results of Parti-GEMI project relating to participatory processes of immigrants, with a special reference to women. In particular, it analyses the situation in Italy in three social areas considered strategic for the assessment of the actual level of participation in local decision-making processes: political domain, educational sector and representation in trade unions. The first part of the article synthetically addresses the institutional and normative framework in Italy in relation to integration policies addressing migrants, while the second part is devoted to the results of the qualitative research field analysis, conducted through in-depth interviews and focus groups with immigrants and stake holders. The last part is devoted to the experimental training program through capacity building methodologies, mentoring and networking strategies put in place to support a group of migrant women in their process of inclusion and activation within social areas of their interest.

**Keywords.** Active citizenship, active participation, gender, migrations, inclusion/integration processes, intercultural education, public policy, trade union.

**Abstract.** L'articolo espone alcuni risultati del progetto Parti – GEMI relative ai processi partecipati dei migranti, con particolare riferimento alle donne. Nello specifico, viene analizzata la situazione italiana in tre aree sociali considerate strategiche per valutare il livello effettivo di partecipazione nei processi decisionali locali: l'ambito politico, il settore educativo e la rappresentanza nei sindacati. Nella prima parte l'articolo affronta il quadro normativo ed istituzionale italiano in relazione alle politiche di integrazione per i migranti, mentre la seconda parte è dedicata ai risultati della ricerca qualitative sul campo, condotta attraverso interviste qualitative e focus group con immigrati e stake holders. L'ultima parte è dedicata al programma sperimentale sviluppato attraverso metodologie di capacity building, mentoring e strategie di networking utilizzate per supportare donne migranti nel processo di inclusione e attivazione nelle aree sociali di loro interesse.

**Parole chiave.** Cittadinanza attiva, educazione interculturale, genere, integrazione, migrazioni, partecipazione attiva, politica pubblica, processi inclusivi.

### 1. About Parti Ge.Mi research project

Parti – Ge.Mi “Opening participatory routes: Mentoring and Building Capacity for Active Citizenship from a Gender Perspective” is an European Investment Found project (EIF) on processes of integration for migrants, and in particular women, living in Europe-

an countries. As the presentation of Parti – Ge.Mi says<sup>1</sup> “integration is a two-way process of mutual accommodation by migrants and non migrant residents and a gendered process with diverse impacts, on men and women. On a European, state and local level, the challenge is to reach a citizen-centred and gender sensitive integration process opening multiple citizenship pathways and ensuring equal opportunities for participation in economic, political, social and cultural life”. Coordinated by the Center for Research on Women Issues (DIOTIMA - Greece), it took place from October 2013 to May 2015 in 4 European countries: Greece, Germany, Spain and Italy, involving 6 partner institutions.

Although the issue of migrants’ civic participation has been raised on the EU agenda (Rec 1206, Council of Europe, Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level, the European Common Agenda for Integration (2005, CBP 9 and 7) legal and policy implementation barriers which exclude or discourage migrants from exercising citizenship rights remain<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, with few exceptions the gender aspects of political and civic integration<sup>3</sup>, including mobilisation, participation and representation (Martiniello, 2005) as well as the convergence between formal and active citizenship rights have attracted little attention. To this aim, Parti – Ge.Mi has developed a mutual empowerment approach targeting both migrants and natives and creating social spaces for meaningful intercultural interaction through mentoring programmes, consultation meetings and capacity building.

The main objective of Parti – Ge.Mi was to create opportunities for mutual collective action of migrants and natives in order to enhance the political mobilisation of migrant men and women That has been carried on by improving participation processes, capacities and resources and, at the same time, trying to strengthen the legitimisation and political representation of stakeholders and institutions involved in social, political, economic and cultural integration. All the Parti Ge.Mi activities have regarded both formal and non formal active citizenship practices as well as shared values of human rights, democracy and intercultural understanding in three key institutions:

- I) Immigrant consultation bodies at local council level
- II) Trade unions
- III) School councils

Parti - Ge.Mi has focused on the power capacities and influence of migrants on decision making processes on local governance, labour union politics and everyday life interaction in schools; it will enable migrants to voice their interests and rights in economic, political, cultural debates, deliberations and consultation procedures; develop strategies for intercultural interaction and encouragement of participation of both migrants and natives, men and women across the above mentioned sectors.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Parti Ge.Mi website page: <<http://www.parti-gemi.eu/about/the-programme/>> (10/2016).

<sup>2</sup> In particular, see IMISCOE reports, OSCE/ODIHR, MPG, 2009, MIPEX 2007, and the reports of Eu projects POLITIS, ICS, AMICALL, MIXITIES.

<sup>3</sup> See Chiappelli – Cabral “Analysis of Policy Formation and Policy Implementation-the Italian case” Wp no. 6, WP2, November 2006 Femipol Integration of Female Immigrants in Labour Market and Society Policy Assessment and Policy Recommendations project <<http://www.femipol.uni-frankfurt.de/>> (10/2016).

## 2. The research

The first months of the project Parti - GE.MI activities have been devoted to the mapping of the laws and policies related to the participation of migrants in three areas of society (political, educational and representation in trade unions) and to carry out in-depth interviews and focus groups with immigrants and stakeholders, in order to ascertain obstacles or opportunities to their active participation in local and/or national contests.

The fieldwork in Italy included a focus group and 15 in-depth interviews with migrant people who have experienced some form of participation in the three selected area (trade unions, education, local politics,) of the host society, adopting a biographical approach. After mapping the local field in the province of Florence and more generally the Tuscany region, the Italian team contacted migrants from all three sectors. Overall there were no significant problems. The team selected mostly trade unions in sectors with a strong migrant presence, for example in agriculture, construction, and domestic work. "With regard to the education sector, it was found that, unfortunately, are still very few, at the regional level, immigrant parents actively included in school boards or otherwise participate in the life and decision – school and now almost all the schools in the area use, at some level the professional role of the linguistic – cultural mediators for issues related to the reception of foreign students. Alongside immigrant parents, interviews were also conducted with brokers who are confronted daily with the schools". Finally having previous research experience in the fields of migrant rights and gender equality made it possible to contact migrants who have influential positions in migrant organizations, who acted as gate openers for the research in local politics.

### 2.1 *Integration through participation of migrants in Italy*

The research results have been not exciting, despite some positive experiences, which are hardly systematic and structural and which often remain confined to particular territories, without a spread all over the country. In general, it is difficult to judge the level of migrants' participation in Italian society as satisfactory. Moreover, qualitative and quantitative researches in relation to the participation of immigrants in the three studied areas are partial when not completely missing, and have no specific emphases on gender dimension. This lack of data, that renders very difficult any attempt to assess European and National integration policies, is not a peculiarity of Italy but unfortunately is shared at EU level in general and by the other Parti Ge.Mi project's partners.

#### 2.1.1 Participation in Local and Regional elections and governance

Despite some very interesting initiatives, in Italy the possibilities for an active participation of migrants in social and political life are, from a legal point of view and both at national and local level, very limited. At national level, the first piece of legislation to be taken into consideration is the Italian Constitution that reserves the right to vote exclusively to Italian citizens. Despite the fact that since the 1990s several proposals have been made by different political parties for the inclusion of migrants in the electorate, no relative legal provision has been passed. It is important, however, to consider the role of local governing bodies with regard to migrants' right to vote at regional and local level. The decisions taken by local

governing bodies on the subject have created a conflict with the national level as to whether these bodies are entitled to legislate on this subject or not. Concerning the municipal level, the first municipalities to introduce the right to vote and be elected for migrants were Venice and Genoa under the advocacy efforts of a number of migrant and antiracist associations. The reaction of the State to such initiatives came with a circular issued by the Ministry of the Interior in January 2004 that indicated the illegitimacy of the acts endorsed by the municipalities stating that any change of the electoral body must be done through a Constitutional reform. However, municipalities made an appeal to the Council of State. At regional level, the first initiatives that emerge as particularly relevant are those undertaken by Tuscany and Emilia Romagna. Emilia Romagna introduced the right to vote for migrants, while the Tuscany Region has included in its Statute the commitment to introduce the right to vote for migrants. After consecutive decisions of the Council of State, the jurisprudence has indicated that although some regions have tried to legislate on the issue, the right to vote for migrants represents a prerogative of the national legislator. Another area to be taken into consideration is that of consultative bodies both at national and local level. The immigration law 40/1998 promoted and supported foreign associations, through the introduction of the “Consultative Body for migrant workers and their families”, and the “National Coordinating Organism of social-integration local policies”. At the local level the same legislation introduced the “Territorial Council for immigration” with the competence to monitor developments that concern migration and to propose specific measures to integrate migrants in local communities.

### 2.1.2 Participation in trade unions

In Italy, as early as in 1989, the trade union CISL established the National Association Beyond Borders (Associazione Nazionale Oltre Le Frontiere – ANOLF) and also set up the “Centres for services to immigrants” (Centri servizi per gli immigrati). In the same period CGIL founded the “Centres for foreign workers” (Centri lavoratori stranieri) and approved the creation of regional and local coordination units of migrants, composed of migrant workers together with Italian union organisers.

Even if there do not seem to exist any severe formal obstacles, with the exception, in some cases, of the requirement of being a legal resident in the country (which can also be negotiated), in Italy few positive measures have been adopted in order to promote migrants’ participation in trade unions: despite the positive relations between trade unions and migrants that led to a constant increase in migrants’ subscriptions (4-5% of annual increase), there still remain some critical points. Many underline that in trade unions there is still a “cognitive and informational incompleteness” about real life conditions of migrants and about the historical development of relationships between migrants and trade unions. The main point of criticism is the lack of professional mobility and the absence of migrants in higher levels of organizations. There is a clear delay in advancing migrants to positions of union delegates and officials; to a certain extent, this deficiency is due to the absence of previous trade union experience in the country of origin of migrants but, in general, we are obliged to recognize -even within the unions- the presence of a “crystal ceiling” between the lower and the higher hierarchical levels. In any case, the presence of migrants in trade unions is a well-established reality and this has sometimes allowed them to introduce, into the debate on employment status in the major sectors of immigrant labour, important reflections.

### 2.1.3 Participation in School

In Italy, a number of laws, decrees, and guidelines at national and local level have underlined the role of education for migrants' inclusion in society. This type of legislation identifies as an instrument for the promotion of the education of migrant children the active participation in school of their families and of ethnic communities' members, migrant associations, cultural mediators etc. The interventions in this regard are specifically aimed at the preservation of the mother tongue competence and the use of mediation in order to facilitate linguistic and cultural contacts between family and school, as well as the opportunity for parents to be included in schools' representative bodies. The New Guidelines for foreign pupils' integration in school signed by the Minister of Education in 2014, dedicates a specific paragraph to the role of parents' participation: "to acquire a real learning experience and social inclusion are goals to which educational institutions should aim with the participation and collaboration of educational subjects on the territory: families, local authorities, universities, associations, institutions [...]". It is stressed that "it is indeed necessary for schools to establish a relationship of listening/dialogue with the family in order to understand the specific conditions and needs." According to the New Guidelines, welcoming the family and accompanying it with a gradual integration corresponds to involving and allowing parents "to share school's initiatives and activities, also sharing a teaching project that enhances the specificity of the pupil". In this process, the New Guidelines suggest using mediators or interpreters to overcome language difficulties and also to facilitate the understanding of the educational choices of the school.

Despite the favourable framework provided by the Guidelines, it seems that schools importance of involving migrant parents in decision-making processes is not very often recognized. Families of migrant students are mostly called at school in order to be informed about administrative issues, about the academic performance of their children or in case of behavioural problems. A strategy adopted by some schools to increase the opportunities for contact between families and school has been the institution of language courses for adults, specifically for migrant women (mothers). In this case, the use of the same space should have enhanced the contacts between school and parents, but in most cases these courses are taught by external teaching staff so the continuity of communication between families and teachers is not established. In general, parents involved in school activities are the same as those involved in political, social and cultural development and participation. Some individual projects have seen the involvement of parents directly in classrooms - in general, interventions for the enhancement of the native language or intercultural activities. Migrant parents are very seldom involved in school councils. Even immigrants who work in a school as linguistic/cultural mediators, are only occasionally involved in the decision-making and participatory processes of the school, even when their own children attend the school in which they work.

## 2.2 Participation and citizenship

The current national legislation, despite the statement of principle contained in art. 9 of T.U.I. does not allow the political rights to non-EU citizens, this means that non-EU citizens can not vote, and be voted at any level election, both in local elections that, even more

so, in the general election. To European Community citizens, however, is only granted the vote in local elections. Up to now, therefore, the exercise of political rights is permitted only to Italian citizens, partly to European Community nationals, with total exclusion for non-EU citizens, although present in Italy for a long time and with a residence permit as long-term residents. In this sense, as it is clear that there is a political will of exclusion of the immigrants and not towards integration. Italian citizenship becomes so the unique real integration tool but it is not simple to obtain: it occurs ten years to naturalization, where they have to compete with the requirements for legal and registered residence, in addition to the production of a certain level of income, then to all these requirements it must be added a, at least three, years wait from the time of the application submission.

It must be pointed out that, until a year ago, access to public administration, therefore, to the public work, was reserved only for Italian and EU citizens, with the total exclusion of non-EU citizens, then another form of exclusion of nationals This time, job-related. The obstacle was removed by regulations but, even today, many local bodies still continue to publish hiring notices in which the Italian nationality is requested. It is therefore necessary to intervene, urgently, to give practical effect to Article. 9 of T.U.I., so that the non-EU citizen can, in fact, participate in local public life, and also to the national, as well as must be the revised national legislation on citizenship, with a reduction in the time for submission of the application for citizenship and for the response from the Ministry, with particular attention to the second generation, and for the children born in the national territory, and for those who have arrived at an early age.”

### **3. Bottom up initiatives for the enhancement of migrants’ participation**

As we have seen, in Italy some efforts have been made to enhance immigrant participation in social and political life even if the obstacles and barriers are still many, both at legal and practical level. But from another perspective, immigrants’ association, and in particular that of women, trade unions and some local bodies are very active in promoting immigrant inclusion in many areas of Italian society.

The mapping activities and the interviews showed that non-conventional forms of participation are largely expressed through associations of migrants. Migrants join on the basis of national belonging, or can join in multi-ethnic or intercultural associations together with other immigrants of different nationalities or with Italian people as well. In the sector of education, for example, parents are involved in school activities in general as part of informal groups, such as parents’ committees.

We consider important to emphasize the important role of immigrant women in promoting active participation in Italian society, also founding many associations on a gender basis. The first migrant women’s associations were set up in the ‘70s when migrant women initially arrived in Italy, to be employed as domestic workers for middle-class families. During the ‘80s, the first migrant women’s organisations on a national basis were formed specifically to provide solidarity and mutual support networks. Key organisations that were formed during the ‘80s on a national basis are the Association of Women from Cape Verde, founded by Maria De Lourdes Jesus, and the Filipino Women’s Council set up by Charito Basa. Other significant associations based on nationality are the Eritrean Women’s Association and the Brazilian Women’s Association set up by Rosa Mendes.

As for Muslim women's associations, these are rather numerous, and they often direct most of their efforts towards trying to overcome general stereotypes of Muslim women. One of the most important is ADMI, the Association of Muslim Women in Italy. As regards Eastern European women's associations, they began to be established with the rise of immigration from these countries during the '90s and tended to focus on intercultural issues and to promote the professional advancement of women, but do not provide basic services. During the '90s a new form of association started to be set up: intercultural associations composed of both migrant and Italian-born women were set up. Among the most important are: *Almateria* and *Almateatro* based in Turin, *Trama di terre* based in Imola and *Nosotras* in Florence. This kind of associations beyond offering a number of services and forms of support and training for migrant women, also aimed at bridging a gap between migrant women associations and historical feminist associations of Italian women that until that time had remained rather separated worlds. In some cases these associations also made some advocacy initiatives in order to change relevant pieces of legislation affecting the migrant population and migrant women in particular.

### *3.1 Participation and Italian context*

Speaking of citizens' participation in Italian political life is an interesting topic that involves reflections on the past, both remote and recent, as well as on the current situation. In the Round Table<sup>4</sup> organized for the final conference of *Parti – Gemi Project* Silvia Noferi (Florence Municipality Council) said: "The only real opportunity for redemption we had was with the Resistance; only in this unique case, so that the many consider to be our first and only War of Independence. The current situation, it is plain for all, regardless of the different political convictions that one may have, is a situation of devastating economic crisis and cultural, ethical and of values poverty which is clearly evidenced also by the message of Pope Francis of January 1, 2015. Understand what is due this cultural poverty is important to understand the reasons for the very poor participation of (all) citizens in political life. If there is a critical consciousness, the consciousness of being citizens with rights but also duties, awareness of the existence of a pact real representation of the people and political participation will always be less."

The vision of Noferi involves the whole Italian society: immigrants may be prevented to participate, but even the ones who could (the Italians) do not demonstrate any interest in participation, so that the problem is at level of the entire nation. "Trying to out-

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<sup>4</sup> The Round table on "Migrants political participation in local councils, trade unions and school councils: obstacles and opportunities" coordinated by Tiziana Chiappelli on took place the 19 March 2015 at the Aula Magna of the Faculty of Education and Psychology of the University of Florence. At the Round Table participated eight experts and/or activists in the different area of society, i.e. in order of speaking: Mr Alberto Tassinari (IRES researcher; expert in migrant participation in trade union), Mrs Silvia Noferi (member of Florence municipality council, expert in participative processes), Mr Simone Faggi (lawyer and politician, vice-mayor of Prato, expert in migrant's right), Mr Serge Sessou (NGOs activist for migrants rights – *Progetto Ottica Sociale*, *Collettivo I marzo*, *Coordinamento Regionale degli Stranieri in Toscana*, international cooperator), Mrs Afrodite Stampouli (member of the Greek Parliament), Mrs Lauretta Macauley (President of *United African Women* organisation, activist for migrant women's rights), Mr Luigi Mughini (lawyer and expert of Italian immigrant's legislation, *Associazione Progetto Arcobaleno*), Mrs Hamdi Abdurahman, Activist and expert in migrant's issues, *Nosotras* association.

line, many think that the lack of civic consciousness is due to decades of deconstruction of fundamental values of civilization: honour, honesty, morality, sense of justice and the value of culture, conducted in recent years by any means, but especially through television, public and private. The spread of “messages” hidden in the images, stereotypes, as demonstrated by the semeiologists of the Sixties and Seventies, by Roland Barthes to Umberto Eco, has contributed to the creation of the “God-money” myth, to which the man and later the successful woman, are certainly rich and beautiful, whether cynical or ruthless. Before the attack of false idols nothing could the school that was to be the incubator of consciences and critical faculties. The Italian school has failed. It failed because it has failed to communicate to the kids, later adults, the fundamental value of culture and education. It will always be worse, because the recent reforms are transforming the school into vocational training courses for labour specialized and nothing more.

Especially “rampant corruption” and the “lack of justice” have contributed to the spread of a “resigned attitude”. “People think that nothing can change... There will progressively an awakening of consciences concurrently to achieve critical levels of subsistence thanks to recent “reforms”, reforms that are not “reform”, are only rights’ cancellation.” Simone Faggi emphasized the importance of giving tools to immigrants, in particular mastery of the language of the host country, as a basis for a path of true integration and inclusion. Be able to speak fluently the language of the host country is critical to interact at all levels, personal and public. For this reason, a serious policy on migration should offer to all migrants courses of language and orientation on the territory, as the necessary basis for participation in society. The positive role of trade unions has been repeatedly stressed, but still remain difficult to involve migrants in decision-making. But many pro-immigration policies were implemented with the support of trade unions, as various studies have shown also by Alberto Tassinari. Afrodite Stampouli illustrated the Greek situation and the stages through which the unions and political parties have supported or hindered migrants and their effective involvement in social and political life in Greece. The severe economic crisis in Greece has resulted in an escalation of conflicts between natives and migrants and the rise of xenophobic parties (Alba Dorada), but also the birth and the conquer of power of social movements and political leaders who are fighting for a greater social justice.

### *3.2 What we can do...*

What are the channels of participation? They are few and at this rate they will be less and less, we note clearly a tendency to replace democracy of first level, i.e. citizens who elect their representatives, to forms of “democracy derived” where elected by the citizens elect other representatives, as in the case of the metropolitan cities (replacing provinces) and the future of the Senate. Increase more and more the distance between the institutions and the population and therefore the feeling of helplessness. It is crucial to reverse the trend and we can do this in several ways: 1) beginning to inform, to deepen, to look for the news, because we can not trust the official means of information, are in the hands of those who have interest to govern an ignorant people; 2) turn off the TV and leave the house, even in walk, talk to people, look at the world with different eyes, to be willing to understand and criticize, to think about what’s wrong, and especially how it could be dif-



ferent and better; 3) join, stop feeling isolated, at any level and in any manner. Look for associations that have in shared with us some issues, it is said that we must all become small but Winston Churchill we can begin to become active citizens.

Up till here, these are general suggestions, but immigrants suffer for a drastic further discrimination at level of law: the difficulties linked to the lack of political rights for non-citizens.

For that reason, a struggle must be done for changing the Italian legislation, as well as offering more structural support for language learning, for social inclusion (even through training and sensitization courses for migrants and locals or other initiatives that may involve them together) – and a special attention on salaries and decent work situations.

It is generally reported a lack of foresight of the policy, a run-up to electoral immediate consensus, and timidity of the Left parties in leading a struggle for a major respect of human rights, equal opportunities and more rightful laws. Participants to the round table have identified some territories particularly active and lively (i.e. Tuscany, and Prato in particular), with a strong role of the second generation, but the issue of migration is still hot from the point of view of political consensus.

It was noticed by all participants that, as the economic crisis increases, the hostility towards immigrants rises, and create a general withdrawal into individual/family problems both from the part of immigrants and natives. The parties are trying to build a consensus on the right, producing or following xenophobic and discriminatory discourses and multiplying hate speeches.

At the same time, the central issue remains that one of the acquisition of citizenship, not only for the migrant active participation in society, but also for basic rights in the workplace and society.

By participants of immigrant origin (Serge Sessou, Hamdi Abduraham, Laureta Macaully) has been also pointed out that it is necessary on the part of migrants themselves, especially those who are finally settled permanently in Europe, to support the rights of those who are still in difficulty and pursue a political struggle for the recognition of these new presences in Europe. The second generations seem more active and involved, but as it is denounced by Hamdi Abduraham, the uncertainty of a stable residence permit often does not allow them to plan their lives in tranquillity and feel fully involved in local realities.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In general, the research carried out by Parti – GeMi project shows how the policy framework lacks of any clear and consistent program, sensitive both to migration and gender issues, in relation to the promotion of active participation in society. Despite the amount of projects carried out, it has not been activated a systematic monitoring of results and have not been developed or adopted appropriate measurement tools. Most of interventions are implemented in specific contexts, usually in connection with the characteristics of local bodies/stake holders, or for ad hoc emergencies.

As Vouyioukas & Liapi say: “Even if active participation and citizenship appear in the EU jargon around integration, there have not been any radical steps undertaken at the EU level, towards the deepening of migrants’ civic rights. Citizenship and civic/political rights

in general remain under the exclusive responsibility and prerogative of (nation) member states” (Vouyioukas, Liapi, 2014, p. 2).

As a final remark, it is important to stress that there is a general lack of policies for gender mainstreaming. Both laws and practices are usually gender blind and often contribute at the mere reproduction of inequalities and stereotypical vision of women. Trade unions and policy makers do not seem to have developed a gender sensitive approach to social and labour matters, even in the case of a positive approach to migration issues, and even in those work sectors highly gendered and ethnicised.

All these factors, in the age of economical crisis, are amplified and the precarisation process in Italy, combined with the high unemployment rates, contribute to make the situation of migrant women even worse than before.

In a social and work landscape so hard, very often the opportunities for participation are drastically reduced: to have a regular residence permit, a fair paid work and with a minimum of labour guarantees, in short to enjoy a real social and labour insertion, are the basic requirements that open the doors to a greater commitment in the social and public spaces.

As a general conclusion, we can say that the project Parti GeMi, urging the direct activation of migrants and supporting them in their personal autonomy and direct involvement in key social areas, has highlighted that the role of the third sector and associations in general (especially that of migrants) can be crucial both to raise personal biographies and to create groups of people able to claim rights for themselves and others that can suffer their same condition.

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