

**TOWARDS CANADA’S THIRD NATIONAL ACTION PLAN TO IMPLEMENT UNSCR1325:  
(MEANINGFULLY) ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITY-LEVEL ACTORS.**

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March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022

In 2004, the UN Secretary-General requested that member states develop action plans to implement the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (UNSCR1315) to show their commitment to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. The first national action plan (NAP) was adopted by Denmark in 2005, soon followed by other European countries. As of September 2021, 98 countries, or 51% of UN member states, have adopted a 1325 NAP.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, several countries are renewing their NAPS, including Canada. Over the last 21 years, a plethora of research conducted on the implementation of UNSCR1325 has argued that best practices for implementing this agenda involved inclusionary practices and participatory processes.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there has only been a limited assessment of the participation of community-level actors throughout WPS implementations. While Canada is drafting its third national action plan, some questions regarding the integration of these actors need to be explored. In line with the views of other scholars and community-level organizations, I argue that the work of civil society is instrumental to the success of the WPS agenda.<sup>3</sup> This brief provides an overview of their involvement in various WPS implementation processes, and more specifically in Canada. It also proposes avenues for improvement to make the participation of community-level actors more meaningful.

**Why we Should Care about Community-Level Actors**

From advocating for its adoption, crafting a draft resolution, and continuing to monitor its progress, civil society organizations (CSOs) have been instrumental in implementing the WPS agenda.<sup>4</sup> Resolution 1325 exists because feminist and women’s rights organizations have lobbied for its adoption for decades, such as during the Vienna Human Rights conferences in 1993, the Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995 and again in 2000 at the Beijing +5 event.<sup>5</sup> Several women’s organizations were also involved in drafting resolution 1325: the International Women’s Tribunal Center, Women’s Caucus for Gender Justice, International Alert, ACCORD (African Center for the Constructive Resolution of Conflicts), and other NGOs.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, civil society has been a space for women to voice their concerns and interests<sup>7</sup>, including in the sphere of peace and security. CSOs undertake continuous efforts to push forward the agenda and improve its implementations. Gender equality is best achieved through consultative

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<sup>1</sup> <https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Coomaraswamy 2015; Miller, Pournik and Swaine 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Goldberg et al. 2015; Hamilton et al. 2021; Odanović 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Cohn, Kinsella, & Gibbings 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Purkarthofer 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, Aboitiz, and Poehlman-Doubouya 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Pierson and Thomson 2018.

processes that involve a multiplicity of actors.<sup>8</sup> Civil society constitutes an essential category of actors that advocate for gender equality within institutions and global frameworks, along with various state departments, universities and consultancies.<sup>9</sup> The presence of external actors is crucial as it enables an external stimulus to broaden the knowledge and practices of other actors involved in the decision-making process.

On the fifteenth anniversary of the first WPS resolution, the UN conducted a high-level review of the implementation of UNSCR 1325. The resulting “Global Study” offers several insights and recommendations regarding the progress of the agenda:

- “Localization of approaches and inclusive and participatory processes are crucial to the success of national and international peace efforts;
- All key actors (states, regional organizations, the media, civil society and youth) are vital to the successful implementation of the Women’s Peace and Security agenda;
- The persistent failure to adequately finance the Women Peace and Security Agenda must be addressed.”<sup>10</sup>

These findings are supported by other studies which have identified key elements necessary for NAPs to be designed and successfully implemented. Such factors include: “political will on the part of high-level government officials; international peer pressure; harnessing resources; accountability; and civil society advocacy efforts”.<sup>11</sup> Another report breaks down the elements needed to create an impactful NAP: (1) inclusive design process and coordination system, (2) strong and sustained political will, (3) allocated resources and (4) monitoring and evaluation plan.<sup>12</sup> Nepal, for example, is often described as having adopted a best practice NAP, mainly because of three elements: (1) its extensive consultation processes, (2) its transparency and (3) the strong involvement of civil society throughout the process.<sup>13</sup> Because CSO’s interests in WPS differ from those of traditional security actors, they act as a constructive pressure that pushes states to implement best practices. Involving various community-level actors also enables a better representation of national groups’ interests – community-level actors can translate those into incentives to politicians and governments.

### **Civil Society Organizations, Community Level Actors: Whom are we Referring to?**

Most accounts or studies on Women, Peace and, Security do not detail the role played by CSOs and, many still look at CSOs in the WPS sectors as “unitary actors”.<sup>14</sup> In one of the rare studies investigating WPS participation dynamics and actors, Martin de Almagro highlights multiple hierarchies in WPS communities. International organizations (IOs) tend to recognize the work of certain actors from civil society who are often considered “elite activists”; usually, they are

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<sup>8</sup> Woodward 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Woodward 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Coomaraswamy 2015, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, Pournik and Swaine 2014, p.17.

<sup>12</sup> Jacevic 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Trojanowska, Lee-Koo, & Johnson 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton et al. 2021, p.6.

individuals with UN training, a higher education, and who speak several languages.<sup>15</sup> In other words, these actors are enabled and sometimes conditioned by the international community, making them the go-to community-level actors. On the other hand, grassroots activists and local women's groups who do not have similar relationships with IOs remain on the margins of the community. Acknowledging that inequalities and hierarchies can be reproduced among CSOs<sup>16</sup> further highlights the necessity of exploring civil society from within and defining whom we are referring to.

Civil society encompasses a wide variety of actors, and the term has become a catch-all concept. CSOs can be described as “formal and informal organizations that are non-governmental actors. This includes social movements, volunteer organizations, indigenous peoples' organizations, mass-based membership organizations or networks and community-based organizations, as well as communities and citizens acting individually and collectively. They can work at the local, national, regional or global levels”.<sup>17</sup> In WPS only, the variety of CSOs involved in implementing the agenda indicates the heterogeneity of these actors ranging from transnational civil society organizations to small organizations (with 15 staff members or less).<sup>18</sup> Although CSOs involved in implementing UNSCR1325 have a broad interest in peace and security, their specific missions and forms range from lawyers' associations, women leadership programmes, human rights organizations, religious associations, and community associations. In brief, CSOs take many forms and sizes have various interests and missions.

One challenge of researching CSO involvement in WPS is pinpointing whom CSO refers to in research and policy documents. Studies and reports on the participation of CSOs often fail to describe their sample in detail. NAPs also remain primarily non-specific when it comes to defining CSOs. This lack of specificity can create an ambiguous understanding of CSOs and their role. For example, the Gambian NAP includes traditional security actors such as “law enforcement officials and the judiciary” in the section dedicated to CSOs. The NAP from Nigeria speaks of “[...] the role of credible CSOs<sup>19</sup>” without defining credibility in that regard, or mentioning who these organizations are. Overall, I find that the term “*community-level actors*” more adequately represents the wide variety of actors that can be included under the “civil society organizations” or “civil society” umbrella (both terms being used interchangeably in many cases). Community-level actors encompass more than organizations. It can consist of actors from the private sector, universities, independent public institutions, non-governmental organizations, and consultants from various fields who work at the community level. This is an important distinction because while organizations are more easily recognized as WPS actors, they are not the only ones who can contribute to the agenda's advancement.

Finally, while the WPS agenda is often equated with women, it is crucial to recognize the benefit of broadening our understanding of participation beyond women. Civil society in the context of

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<sup>15</sup> Martin de Almagro 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Adams and Kang 2007, p.455.

<sup>17</sup> Golberg et al. 2015, p.121.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Nigeria NAP 2017, p.36.

1325 is used as a synonym for women’s organizations in many instances. However, other community-level actors are also actively advocating and promoting UNSCR1325. Niyongabo acknowledges that in Burundi, “there are also CSOs that work indirectly on UNSCR 1325 and 1820 – the majority are women’s organizations, although some are not, such as the Coalition of Men Against Violence Against Women”.<sup>20</sup> Efforts still need to be made to integrate non-traditional or excluded WPS actors, including men and boys and LGBTIQ+ people and communities.<sup>21</sup>

### **What Works Concretely?**

In 2014, almost 90% of UN peace processes involved consultations with women’s groups.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, these consultations were sometimes “only procedural and lacked conscious preparation, representativeness, and follow-up”<sup>23</sup>. While it is commonly agreed that bottom-up approaches engaging various stakeholders improve the effectiveness of WPS implementation, states and organizations still struggle to integrate community-level actors meaningfully. Mentions of civil society involvement or input in national action plans are thus insufficient participation indicators.<sup>24</sup> This section looks at how community-level actors are participating in the WPS implementation process, what works from their point of view, and the elements influencing the success of these collaborations between community-level actors and more traditional security actors.

Participation and collaboration modes through which community-level actors can participate in WPS are numerous. These forms of participation described in national action plans usually include consultations, networks or coalitions, meetings and working groups.<sup>25</sup> CSOs representatives can also be included within the team or institution implementing a 1325 NAP. These collaborations occur between community-level actors and governments trying to implement UNSCR1325, but they are also a way for community-level actors to collaborate. CSOs named collaboration with other CSOs a critical factor contributing to their work and advocacy for women, peace and security.<sup>26</sup> For example, in Finland, the 1325 Network involves over 10 CSOs representatives and scholars from various universities. A broader question to consider when it comes to these consultative processes is also who is consulted – is it only domestic actors, or are states also taking the time to consult community-level actors in the country where the programming will be implemented? Unfortunately, it is rare that NAP detail the process and actors involved in these participatory efforts.

As previously mentioned, Nepal’s NAP is often referred to as a model for its participatory and inclusive design. Throughout the implementation process, consultations were organized with community-level actors. These actors included “members of local peace committees, women’s

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<sup>20</sup> Niyongabo 2012, p. 12

<sup>21</sup> Hagen 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Coomaraswamy 2015, p.45.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.45.

<sup>24</sup> Goldberg et al. 2015, p.45.

<sup>25</sup> Odanović 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

groups, children from families affected by armed conflicts, local district officials and representatives of national NGOs and UN entities”.<sup>27</sup> Participation was not limited to formal civil society organizations. It included individuals at the most local scales, and the role of each actor was made clear all through the process. Transparency and clarity in the functions given to community-level actors contribute to more accountability and ensure that engagements made towards the localization of the action plans are respected. The Republic of Ireland’s NAP can also be considered a best practice approach as its process included several consultations with CSOs and activists from 3 countries (Northern Ireland, Liberia, and Timor–Leste).<sup>28</sup> This enabled the NAP to be more anchored in the diverse realities of people concerned by the issues it addresses.

Moreover, collaboration with community-level actors is most effective when governments put concrete coordination mechanisms in place. This ensures long-term cooperation rather than relying on ad hoc consultations that will be limited in scope and time. In the United Kingdom, the Associate Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace, and Security (APG-WPS) was set up to coordinate cooperation efforts between governmental bodies and CSOs throughout the NAP design and evaluation process.<sup>29</sup>

When actions do not reflect words and objectives are not supported by concrete actions and funding, the participation of local women's groups and civil society becomes a check-the-box exercise. Community-level actors face many hurdles to achieve their goals and be meaningfully integrated throughout WPS implementation processes, and some seem recurring in the literature. Firstly, community-level actors are affected by a lack of support and funding. In North America and Europe, most of the funding received by CSOs comes from local governments and ministries.<sup>30</sup> Still, it is often too limited: “Others are paid, NGOs are expected to volunteer”.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, overcoming barriers of mistrust and lack of understanding between traditional security actors and community-level actors is necessary. As a community-level actor, it can be hard to find a balance between engaging with where the government is and at the same time pushing them to do more and better.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the issue of reporting and access to data also limits the work of community-level actors. They are often not provided sufficient internal data, or access to it at all, to conduct their evaluation of the progress made by their own government. It is rare that NAPs dedicate specific funding to community-level monitoring. For example, although the Australian NAP indicates that it will “encourage and support civil society to release shadow reports”<sup>33</sup> this objective is not backed up by any funding or coordination mechanism that would allow community-level actors to be systematically included in monitoring WPS progress. While monitoring and evaluation remain one of the main challenges to implementing NAPs, this stage also represents an opportunity for CSO collaboration and integration. Community-level input can help identify potential agenda failures and avenues of improvement. It can also increase accountability and transparency.

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<sup>27</sup> Cabrera-Balleza 2011, p.4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Odanović 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Goldberg et al. 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> RN-WPS 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Australia NAP 2021, p.55.

### **Canada's National Action Plans and Civil Society: Where does it Stand?**

Although this definition is not included in the Canadian Action Plans, the government of Canada typically defines “civil society” as “a wide range of non-government, non-profit, and voluntary-driven organizations, as well as social movements, through which people organize to pursue shared interests, values, and objectives in public life”.<sup>34</sup> The second Plan (2017-2022) introduced several mechanisms to better integrate these actors into the implementation of the NAP, such as the “Action Plan Advisory Group”. The Advisory Group meetings offer community-level actors the opportunity to provide their feedback on the advancement of the NAP and collaborate with other departments that are members of the plan. For example, out of the September 2022 Advisory group meeting participants, 64% worked for the government, 18% came from civil society, 9% represented indigenous organizations, and 9% represented other actors.<sup>35</sup>

One of the specificities of the WPS Advisory Group is that it is co-chaired by the Women, Peace, and Security Network - Canada (WPSN-C) and Global Affairs Canada. The WPSN-C is composed of more than 80 Canadian non-governmental organizations and individuals. Throughout the years the network has engaged actively in WPS implementation in Canada and internationally and is considered a “Good Practice” that promotes participation and representation within WPS implementations.<sup>36</sup> Beyond its reporting and advisory work in Canada it has also contributed to the public submission to the 2015 Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, along with several others community-level actors.<sup>37</sup> The institutionalization of this collaboration between the Canadian government and the WPSN-C is an asset for WPS implementations in Canada, yet it remains underfunded. Most of the work conducted by the WPSN-C is voluntary, except for the work of a part-time coordinator. The Network receives occasional small contracts from the government of Canada to work on specific issues (such as the consultations), but it does not receive any core funding.

Regarding accountability and monitoring, Canada has committed to publishing public progress reports (due every September) that are tabled in Parliament.<sup>38</sup> Each department also produces its own progress report. While this contributes to transparency about the implementation of UNSCR1325, community-level actors have highlighted that these reports are usually not released on time: “The progress report for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2020, was delayed and released in June 2021”.<sup>39</sup> Although COVID plays a part in the delay of this report, attention needs to be brought to this issue, so it does not become a recurring practice. Overall, community-level

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<sup>34</sup> Government of Canada 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Women, Peace and Security Network-Canada 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.12.

<sup>37</sup> Sonneveld 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Progress reports and documentation regarding the implementation of UNSCR1325 are available here : <https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/cnap-pnac/index.aspx?lang=eng>

<sup>39</sup> Women, Peace and Security Network-Canada 2022, p.1

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actors from various organizations agree that when progress reports are published late, the data and content of the report may no longer necessarily reflect the implementation of the agenda.<sup>40</sup> The September 2022 Advisory group meeting report highlights several additional challenges, including gaps in data collection, lack of analysis of the successes and shortcomings of the implementation, weak domestic components. Funding also remains a concern for civil society operating in WPS-related spheres. While the second plan indicates that “Canada announced [an initial] \$150 million in funding for local women’s organizations”<sup>41</sup> this funding has mainly benefited women’s organizations in “developing countries” through the Women’s Voice and Leadership Program.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the 2019-2020 Global Affairs Canada’s progress report states that funding globally by national governments to women’s organizations decreased and funds were reallocated towards pandemic responses.<sup>43</sup> Funding issues can limit the activities and opportunities of community-level actors. For example, the WPSN-C conducts its activities and reporting in English due to the lack of funding for bilingual translations.

Community-level actors are universally underfunded, and this emphasizes the need for Canada to be more transparent on how its national action plan resources are attributed. Domestic community-level actors and CSOs are noticeably absent from the plan's funding scheme and should not be overlooked in future implementation or review efforts.

Beyond the institutionalization of civil society partnerships through the action plans, other activities integrate community-level actors in discussions and implementations of UNSCR 1325. Canada co-launched the *Women, Peace, and Security Civil Society Leadership Award* with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to recognize individuals, civil society organizations or networks advancing the WPS agenda.<sup>44</sup> Representatives of civil society and a national Indigenous organization were involved in the selection process. The Research Network on Women, Peace, and Security (RN-WPS), funded by the MINDS program from the Department of National Defence, offers broad Canadian-led expertise on issues related to the WPS agenda. The RN-WPS organized a teach-in between scholars and civil society leaders to reflect on the Canadian action plans.<sup>45</sup> Large conferences, roundtables and symposiums offer an additional opportunity to build more of these relationships.<sup>46</sup> By mobilizing scholars, public servants, and community-level actors through various events and activities, Canada is fostering a diverse and reflexive WPS community of practice.

The second Canadian Plan and its implementation can be considered as best practice for its integration of civil society as a meaningful partner throughout the process, specifically through the Action Plan Advisory Group and the Women, Peace and Security Network Canada. Although

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<sup>40</sup> RN-WPS conference 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Canada NAP 2017, p.17.

<sup>42</sup> [https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues\\_development-enjeux\\_developpement/gender\\_equality-egalite\\_des\\_genres/wvl\\_projects-projets\\_vlf.aspx?lang=eng](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/gender_equality-egalite_des_genres/wvl_projects-projets_vlf.aspx?lang=eng)

<sup>43</sup> Global Affairs Canada 2021.

<sup>44</sup> <https://wps-fps-award-prix>.

<sup>45</sup> Beaulieu 2022.

<sup>46</sup> RN-WPS 2022.

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Canada has successfully fostered different partnerships and institutionalized collaboration with community-level actors, it still needs to address several gaps.



## Recommendations: Improving the Participation of Community-Level Actors in Canada's Third National Action Plan

### RECOMMENDATION 1: TO ALL WPS ACTORS

#### 1.1 Define what "civil society" encompasses

Civil society is heterogeneous; it is not a synonym for grassroots and local organizations. Reports, action plans and studies should explicitly define which specific actors are involved in the different phases of NAPs implementations. This definition should be included in the definition section that is usually part of every NAPs.

#### 1.2 Rely on the diversity of community-level actors

WPS implementation processes should include the largest possible number of community-level actors, from formal CSOs to groups of individuals. Implementation actors should look at how they could better represent individuals that may have been excluded from WPS implementation processes so far. Adopting localization strategies could be a way to do so. For example, in an attempt to draft a plan for 2012 in Colombia, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex (LGBTQI) Community was consulted to provide input on their lived realities through a localization programme.<sup>47</sup>

#### 1.3 Create shared spaces that are mindful of diversity

To create a diverse and inclusive community it is necessary to be mindful of every actor, including their limitations. Traditional spaces, whether they are academic ones or community ones, may not be comfortable for everyone. For example, not every community-level actor has enough funding to take part in a large-scale conference. These differences need to be considered to ensure that community actors are engaged at their levels.

#### 1.4 Engage with men and boys

Women's concerns are the cornerstone of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. But as scholars have demonstrated, it should not mean that the experiences of men, boys and other people should be dismissed. They should be considered as political actors within the agenda as much as they should be regarded as recipients and targets of UNSCR1325 implementation.

#### 1.5 Improve access to data

All actors should ensure that progress and annual reports are published systematically and on time for monitoring and evaluation to be more inclusive and transparent.

#### 1.6 Foster a bilingual community

It is crucial that institutional networks pursue a bilingual policy to recognize and better integrate Canada's diversity. Several conditions must be met for such a community to be created. On one hand, governments must adequately support the efforts of WPS actors so

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<sup>47</sup> Global Network of Women Peacebuilders 2013

that they can set up bilingual activities. On the other hand, community-level actors must be more proactive in including bilingualism in their activities by seeking to include more francophone representation in their networks, which are predominantly anglophone.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2: TO THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA**

### **2.1 Increase transparency and accountability**

The government of Canada needs to be explicit about the roles and funding of community-level actors. For example, departments like GAC should be clear about the criteria that limit their financial assistance to community-level actors (including eligibility, selection, and decision-making criteria...). Being more accountable also implies supporting civil society and external implementation review at the national level. To do so, reports on the implementation of UNSCR1325 should be publicly available so they can systematically function as accountability tools.

### **2.2 Create a national funding mechanism on WPS that includes civil society as a meaningful partner**

Community-level actors should have a say in how WPS resources and funding are allocated. This funding should be free from donor's restrictions. Funding available should be divided between domestic and international funding priorities. To support the implementation of this funding mechanism, research should be conducted to identify best practices related to inclusive funding mechanisms.

### **2.3 Improve support provided to Canada-based organizations and actors**

The work community-level actors need to be valued and recognized in the sphere of peace and security. While a large part of Canada's WPS funding is bound to be spend on programming abroad through foreign affairs, the work of domestic community-level actors still needs to be properly compensated. Community-level actors should be remunerated for their work during consultations, reporting and other commitments to WPS. To do so, a multi-year funding mechanism for Canadian organizations such as the WPSN-C should be put in place. This would allow the Network to receive long-term support and predictable financial income to achieve its mission.

### **2.4 Improve reporting processes**

The government of Canada and, more specifically, the agencies responsible for implementing UNSCR1325 should develop a more robust and integrated reporting plan. The priority should be finding ways to meet reporting deadlines. Secondly, community-level actors should be included in revising indicators and targets to make monitoring and evaluation more effective. Thirdly, reporting on WPS should be integrated into the annual reporting mechanisms from each department to ensure that WPS issues are not treated in silos to broader implementation efforts.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: TO COMMUNITY LEVEL ACTORS**

#### **3.1 Improve transparency and accountability**

Transparency and accountability efforts should not be limited to governments. Community-level actors involved in implementing the WPS should also devote some of their efforts to evaluating their progress and making their strategies and self-assessment public.

#### **3.2 Strengthen collaboration between CSOs and academia**

Improving communication with research and academia should be a core development task for community-level actors in WPS. Both contribute significantly to WPS discussions and policymaking through different lenses.

#### **3.3 Continue to build a more inclusive WPS community**

Networks are a crucial cooperation tool; they should not be taken for granted. Networks should always push to be more inclusive and diverse and look for those not yet included through different means, including consultations, surveys, and conferences.

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