

Racialized Immigrant
Women's Experience
of Workplace Health
and Safety

Credits

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Introduction

Racialized women

in British Columbia

often face significant

barriers to fair employment, despite being educated and skilled. Many are pushed into low-wage, precarious jobs where they experience discrimination, unsafe working conditions, and limited awareness of their legal rights. A lack of trust in the legal system, language and cultural barriers, and precarious immigration status further prevent them from seeking help or asserting their rights in the workplace. These challenges—compounded by deskilling and systemic racism—leave many women vulnerable to exploitation and harm.



The Safer Workplaces project builds on our earlier phase, Short-Changed,

by deepening the investigation into workplace health and safety issues experienced by racialized immigrant women. In 2024 and 2025, we worked with a group of 12 women, as well as service providers, legal aid organizations and union representatives, to explore barriers to accessing employment rights and protections—especially through WorkSafeBC.

Through education, dialogue, and community engagement, the project aimed to raise public and policymaker awareness, empower women with legal knowledge, and recommend solutions for creating safer, more inclusive workplaces.



"I hope, with all my heart, that policy makers can make effective actions after hearing all these stories." Project participant

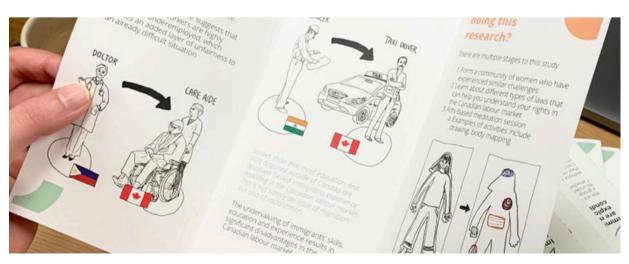
Project Metodology

The Safer Workplaces project (2024– 2025) focused on understanding and addressing the workplace challenges faced by racialized immigrant women in BC. Central to the project was the formation of a Support Group with Lived Experience Experts—12 women from diverse backgrounds who came together over eight months. These participants shared personal stories, learned about their legal rights, and built a strong sense of community. The support group included sessions legal education workshops, storytelling activities, and group reflections, creating space for learning, healing, and empowerment. Participants also contributed creative work—written stories and visual art—to raise awareness about their experiences and challenges in the workplace.

The project also included key informant interviews with professionals such as legal advocates, community workers, and union representatives who work closely with racialized and immigrant communities.

These interviews provided insights into broader systemic issues, especially the barriers women face in accessing legal protections and reporting health and safety concerns.

In addition to direct research, the project emphasized creating a network of allies knowledge sharing through multimedia art, reports, and events. We reached out to immigrant-serving organizations, legal clinics, and grassroots groups to strengthen partnerships and share findings. As part of knowledge mobilization, participants collaborated with a multimedia artist to create visual representations of their stories. These were shared through a community event, a social media campaign, and a series of short videos and reports aimed at engaging both community members and decision-makers. This multi-platform approach allowed us to amplify the voices of racialized immigrant women and push for more equitable and safer work environments.



Storytelling for Change

Storytelling workshops led by **Shanga Karim**—an immigrant, journalist, and activist—created human rights supportive space for racialized immigrant women to reflect on and share their lived experiences in the Canadian labor market. With guidance from facilitators, all eleven participants wrote personal stories and then collaborated with visual artist, curator human rights photographer Natalia Botero, and graphic designer **Alejandra Villanueva** to co-create powerful visual artworks. These stories, written in diverse styles, including poetry and third-person narration,

reveal the systemic and inter- personal challenges these women face—such as discrimination, exploitation, and a lack of workplace protections. Many struggle to recognize their experiences as abuse or rights violations, and face significant barriers in accessing support and resources. Yet, their stories highlight both their talents and resilience, and serve as a powerful call to action for policymakers and service providers to address these ongoing injustices. To protect participants' privacy, some names and identifying details have been changed.

Full stories are available on our website.



An educator from a South Asian country working in the childcare and early education industry at present, after struggling to get a job in public education in Canada, shared her agonies after having an injury at her survival job:

To make ends meet, I took a job as a night security guard at Cap Mall. The pay was meager, but I was too proud to be picky. As I walked the empty hallways, my footsteps echoed in the silence, a stark reminder of my loneliness. I was exhausted and scared, but I buried those feelings deep inside. One fateful night, I slipped on an unmarked wet floor, crashing hard against a bench. Dazed, I brushed off the pain, telling myself, "You're fine. You can't lose this job." I didn't report the incident, thinking it was just another hurdle to overcome. But the days that followed were a blur of confusion and blackouts. I often found myself lost in the mall, unsure of how I got there. I was terrified of losing my job, and without medical benefits, seeking help felt impossible.

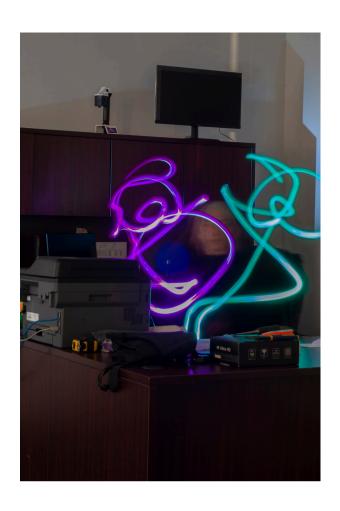
A Middle Eastern mother of two young children on work permits started a job "in dark, cramped containers with no fresh air" in a multinational company, she shared in her story how her expectations were shattered, especially when she had an injury. The introduction to her story reads:

When I moved to Canada, I believed that working in a developed country meant fair treatment, professional environments, and strong worker protections. I was excited to start my first job at FedEx in Delta, BC, thinking it was the beginning of a safer and more secure life. But that belief quickly crumbled. I was assigned to work inside dark, airless containers, lifting and stacking heavy packages—work that was physically demanding, especially for someone over 40, unlike my younger coworkers. One day, a heavy metal divider door fell on my foot, causing intense pain and bleeding. When I asked for help, my supervisor refused to call an ambulance, telling me I'd have to cover the \$70 fee myself. I was devastated that a major company would prioritize saving money over a worker's health. Eventually, I received treatment, but the emotional impact lingered. I later contacted WorkSafeBC, hoping for support, but the case manager was dismissive, implying my injury wasn't serious if I could still walk. That experience taught me that no job is worth sacrificing your safety and that knowing your rights is essential. I now share my story with other immigrants and newcomers to help them protect themselves, because even in a country like Canada, vulnerable workers are too often ignored



A South Asian woman with a background and years of experience in banking had to rebuild a career in the childcare sector in Canada. Negative experience at her first job which forced her to find a new career path speaks to both the systemic and interpersonal discrimination many racialized women face:

Starting my first job as an accounts associate at a logistics company was exciting but also scary. As a new immigrant, everything felt different—the language, the culture, and how people worked. I wanted to do my best and show my abilities, but the workplace was challenging. Some of my coworkers often talked about me behind my back. They commented on how I dressed, how I spoke, and how I wasn't a full-time employee. They didn't seem to recognize my abilities or work in that organization. Their words hurt me deeply and made me feel small and unimportant. Every day, I felt nervous and stressed, wondering what they might say next. I started to doubt myself and my skills. The workplace felt lonely and cold. I wanted to speak up but was too afraid. The stress made it hard to focus, and I often felt sad and frustrated.





A young South Asian mother trying to find her place after feeling "out of place" due to very difficult work experience at one of Canada's largest restaurant chain and a local cosmetic company:

My first job became my lifeline.
The air smelled of coffee and food,
the pace relentless, the faces ever-changing.
It was exhausting but kept me going.
My English was weak; words didn't come easily.
Sometimes, I heard laughter when I stumbled,
but I didn't let it break me.
I learned from every mistake, every day.
Three months later, I found another job.
For a time, I worked both,
long days and short nights,
reminding myself: Work hard. Learn. Make them proud.
In three years, I earned three promotions,
proving that determination grows even in the coldest
winters.



An experienced physician from the Middle East, trying to find a role in the Canadian health sector after years of volunteering, working menial jobs, and experiencing health and structural challenges, wrote:

I was working as a cashier and I developed a medical condition that required a minor surgery, and my doctor recommended two days of sick leave. I informed my employer, but they refused to grant me the leave. I couldn't believe it—how was this possible? I was sick, and my doctor had provided written proof. But they still denied my request. In the end, I had no choice but to quit because my health was more important ... People warned me that filing a complaint with a legal organization could harm my résumé and make it harder to find future employment. I was also told that hiring a lawyer would be expensive. I felt completely devastated ... I believe it was a form of workplace abuse.

A young Latin American woman with closed work permits working and experiencing horrendous abuse at her workplace narrated a heart wrenching story:

I am a woman. I am an immigrant. And I am human. I have the right to live without fear.

I woke up screaming, "I need to call my boss! They're going to fire me!" I gasped, panic rushing through my body. A nurse ran in and held me. "You just had surgery for six hours. You need to rest. I'll call a social worker," she said, her voice calm but firm. At first, I didn't understand. My mind was spinning, my heart racing, and tears ran down my face. Then it hit me. I worked in that restaurant for three years. I endured abuse every day. And now, because I spoke up, they wanted to fire me? Through my sobs, I told the nurse everything. She looked at me with kindness and said, "In Canada, we do not tolerate abuse. You are safe." She adjusted my IV and gave me something for the pain.



Originally a Psychologist from Mexico, another Latin American woman, fade up with the work in low paying survival jobs and systemic racism in Canada, wrote about the violence she experienced at the first job she tried to secure as a cleaner:

I was kneeling, cleaning a corner of the room where dust had accumulated, and I hadn't finished. I told her I was almost done. But she didn't repeat herself. She grabbed the bottle of bleach we were carrying and threw it against my back. I only felt it smash against me. Unfortunately, upon impact, the bottle burst open, and the liquid began soaking my clothes ... it wasn't just my pants that lost their color; my hopes faded, the little strength I had left washed away, and my dreams are slowly losing their brightness.





A Latin American professional woman currently working in the trade sector, a strong advocate for equity and social justice shared her struggle to find a job in Canada and the interpersonal discrimination faced due to gender and language barrier:

The first day of work you complete training about good practices at the job site, but the reality is not what WorkSafeBC standards stand for. The respect to individuals despite race or gender wasn't something I saw in my first year. My coworkers mocked my accent, and because I felt responsible for being there, trying to make a living out of this trade, I never stood up for myself ... I remember how I cried after arriving at my house those days, but despite all the frustration, my foreman was amazing at teaching, so I continued with my best attitude.



A South Asian woman with a PhD, still to land a stable paid job in Canada testifies to the serious issue of deskilling:

When I walked into the community kitchen for the first time, my hands wouldn't stop trembling. My resume—a single, wrinkled sheet of paper with barely anything on it—felt like a cruel joke. I was from an academic background with a deep love for cooking, and I had no formal culinary training, just years of cooking for my family. But I clung to one thought: I can do this. Jeff, the manager, greeted me with a big smile. His handshake was firm, his voice warm. "So, Swa," he said, flipping through my pitiful resume, "what's your specialty?" I had been prepared for this question. Pulling out the container I had brought, I opened it to reveal fresh, golden-brown aloo parathas. Jeff took one bite, and his eyes lit up. "These are incredible," he said. "You're hired."I walked home that day with my heart soaring. After months of rejection, I finally had a job. More than that, I had a purpose.

A Latin American immigrant woman with a background in administrative jobs, experienced an injury but did not receive any accommodation at her work in the childcare sector. Neither did she receive the support expected from the WSBC staff as described in her story:

Liz remembered being in deep pain when she got a call from WorkSafeBC. A woman on the line asked —where exactly was the pain? What kind of pain was it? But Liz didn't know the medical terms. She was hurt, confused, and scared. She tried her best to explain, but her words didn't come out the "right" way. She felt small, like her pain wasn't being heard or understood ... as an immigrant woman, she couldn't even count on other women at WSBC for support or guidance. She had hoped for understanding—for someone to see her pain and help her through it. But instead, she was met with coldness, as if her struggles didn't matter. That kind of disappointment cuts deep, especially when it comes from someone you thought might relate or care.





A professional Latin American immigrant woman saw her hopes for a better life in Canada unravel after a workplace injury led to permanent physical and mental disability. Despite her condition, she was denied proper compensation by WorkSafeBC and faced neglect, gaslighting, and abuse from her employer, leaving her deeply traumatized:

Dealing with WorkSafeBC after the injury was not a path to healing—it became a source of deeper trauma. What should have been a system of support felt cold, intimidating, and dismissive. Instead of care, there was pressure to recover on command, invalidation of pain, and a sense of guilt simply for being hurt. In this so-called land of opportunity, the butterfly learned the harsh truth: behind polished policies and promises lies a system that often protects employers over workers—especially migrant ones. The workplace operated like a machine of modern slavery, where exploitation thrived in silence, and fear was the currency used to keep wings clipped. This story is not just about injury—it's about a call for justice, dignity, and real protection for those who carry nations forward on their backs.

Storytelling









Common Threads

Significant insights gained from the stories are summarized below:

- Racialized immigrant women arrive in Canada with high hopes, but often face post-migration trauma due to systemic barriers.
- Employment is key to identity and purpose; underemployment and deskilling harm health and self-worth.
- Lack of credentials, Canadian certifications, and recognized experience blocks access to meaningful jobs.
- Deskilling through survival jobs negatively affects health and wellbeing.
- Underemployment is a longstanding issue; even finding volunteer work is difficult for newcomer women.
- Language barriers lead to isolation and intersect with race and gender, especially in male-dominated fields.

- Navigating healthcare is difficult due to language and lack of culturally safe care, often compromising women's health.
- Injured workers struggle to get accommodations, leading to preventable health issues.
- Women on temporary status face abusive conditions and fear of deportation due to closed work permits.
- Unfamiliarity with employment and health standards increases vulnerability and prevents women from asserting their rights.
- Lack of support, information, and culturally safe resources hinders workplace rights and safety implementation.
- WSBC should adopt trauma-informed practices and acknowledge systemic barriers to provide equitable support.

Findings

Finding 1: Racialized Immigrant Women Face Compounded Barriers to Workplace Safety

Racialized immigrant women—especially Temporary Foreign Workers and international students—often face unsafe and unfair conditions at work. Their experiences are shaped by the overlap of gender, race, immigration status, and economic pressure. Many work in male-dominated industries where they face gender-based risks and harassment. Others are afraid to speak up about unsafe conditions because of the fear of retaliation or losing their status. Often, their education and skills are overlooked, forcing them into low-wage jobs with little protection. These overlapping challenges create an environment where exploitation is common and their rights are difficult to assert.

Finding 2: Language and System Barriers Limit Access to Workplace Safety

Many racialized immigrant women struggle to access basic workplace safety information due to language barriers, limited digital literacy, and a lack of familiarity with Canadian systems. Health and safety resources are often only available in English and don't reflect the cultural or linguistic realities of their communities. This makes it hard to understand rights, report injuries, or file claims through systems like WSBC. For temporary workers, especially those on farms, training is often rushed or inadequate, and there may be no access to phones or fax machines to submit paperwork. Fear of losing their job keeps many from speaking up, and even when support is available, it may miss important cultural context or be too technical to understand. As a result, too many fall through the cracks of a system that was never built with them in mind.

Finding 3: Systemic barriers in WorkSafeBC processes

Many racialized immigrant women find WorkSafeBC difficult to navigate. The system is complex, bureaucratic, and often doesn't respond to the realities of vulnerable workers. While it's meant to protect health and safety, the process is rigid and can be especially hard to follow when dealing with issues like bullying, harassment, or psychological trauma—experiences that are often dismissed or misunderstood. Delays in care and lack of follow-up can make people feel ignored. For many, there's a deep lack of trust in the system, and without someone to advocate for them, their voices are lost. What's missing is a bigger-picture understanding of their lived experiences—how trauma, culture, language, and systemic inequality shape their access to justice and care.

Findings

Finding 4: Unions Often Fall Short in Supporting Racialized Immigrant Women

While labor unions are meant to protect workers' rights, our research found that some racialized immigrant women either don't understand what unions are or feel unsupported by them—especially in cases of bullying and harassment (B&H). Service providers with union backgrounds expressed frustration over the lack of meaningful support during their WSBC claims, highlighting how unions and WSBC processes often failed to recognize or address intersectional experiences, such as racial trauma. Both noted that support was superficial, focused only on the existence of policies rather than their actual effectiveness in protecting workers.

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Recomendations

System change for

improved health and

safety of racialized women

Real change requires unions and WSBC to recognize and address intersectional issues and provide trauma-informed, culturally responsive support that actually works for racialized workers.

Recommendation 1: Education & Awareness

Racialized groups need more than basic information about Employment Standards and WSBC. They require training in self-advocacy, communication skills, and digital literacy. WSBC should collaborate with community organizations to deliver culturally sensitive, effective education programs.

Recommendation 2: Navigators & Advocates

Due to WSBC's complex bureaucracy, cultural navigators from settlement organizations are essential to help racialized women navigate the claims process, offering education, emotional support, and advocacy.

Recommendation 3: Language & Cultural Support

WSBC and government services should provide language assistance and culturally sensitive, trauma-informed support. Translators should reflect the cultural nuances and unique challenges of racialized women.

Recommendation 4: Support for Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs)

WSBC needs a dedicated department for TFWs, with staff trained in the specific legal and cultural complexities they face, ensuring support that is trauma-informed and culturally safe.

Recomendations

Recommendation 5: Community Capacity Building

More funding should go to community organizations for legal rights education. WSBC should collaborate with these groups to provide training and capacity building, ensuring racialized women understand and can assert their workplace rights.

Recommendation 6: Proactive Investigations

WSBC should take a more active role in investigating injuries, especially for vulnerable workers who may lack resources or language skills. They should ensure that workers don't have to navigate the claims process alone.

Recommendation 7: Employer Education

Employers should receive training in Canadian employment standards and health regulations in their languages. Once educated, they should be held accountable for worker safety.

Recommendation 8: Building Trust

WSBC needs to foster trust with racialized communities. Collaboration with settlement organizations can bridge communication gaps, ensuring that workers feel safe in reporting workplace safety issues.

Recommendation 9: Sensitivity in Inspections

WSBC field officers should be more thorough and sensitive in inspections, particularly when engaging racialized workers who may fear retaliation.

Recommendation 10: Greater Flexibility in Medical Evaluations

Racialized workers should have the option to visit their regular doctors for evaluations, as they may feel more comfortable with familiar, culturally aligned healthcare providers.

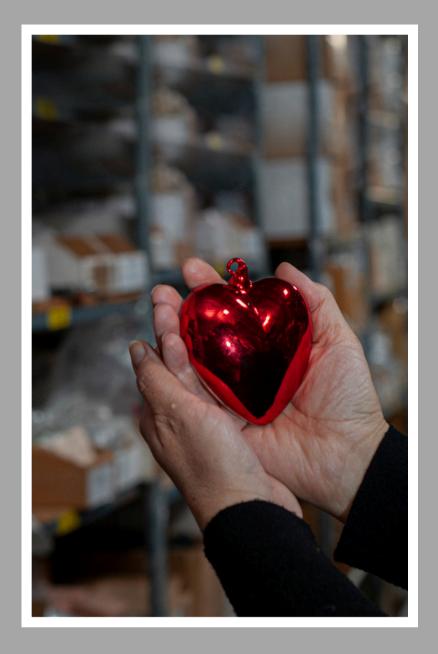
Recommendation 11: Integrated Case Management

Rather than separate claims for physical and psychological injuries, WSBC should streamline the process by allowing case managers to share information, reducing the stress on workers.

Additional Resources

Workplace
Health and
Safety: Tips and
Resources for
Racialized
Women in BC

Workplace Health and Safety: and Resources for Racialized Women in BC, was developed from a series of legal information workshops focused on employment standards workplace and bullying and harassment. Facilitated by staff from SALCBC, the workshops aimed empower participants education through awareness building. A separate question-and-answer session addressed participants' specific concerns, and the insights gathered from that session were compiled into this practical guide to support racialized women navigating workplace challenges in British Columbia.



Additional Resources

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Health and Safety

Tips and Resources for Racialized Women in BC

1 Gather Information

Work Safe BC (WSBC) operates on a system that emphasises evidence and documentation (i.e. diagnosable condition by a medical doctor or psychiatrist). So, gather information to use as evidence -doctor's notes; details such as date, time and place of the incident; name of supervisors, managers, colleagues; witnesses or people who were present at the site of incidence; pictures (not showing people), etc.

3 Understand Roles

Know and understand the role of WSBC Representatives.

They are not your friends or counselors, and they follow a system or protocol. They can't help you if you don't have the information that they need.

2 Maintain Mental Well-Being

Health and safety is a big umbrella that includes physical injuries and psychological conditions (due to bullying and harassment).

Psychological issues are harder to prove; also there is stigma around such issues. Don't be shy to speak up about such issues, but at the same time, make sure you are willing to report; no one should force you to report or speak up.

4 Be Prepared

Anytime you're working with WSBC, they need information like the date, time, name etc. Give all of those details so they understand what you're asking for and what you need. Be prepared and organized with all the information before calling WSBC.

5 Have an Interpreter

Language barrier is a huge problem; if you can't understand what they say, you should ask for an interpreter. If you need an interpreter, WSBC should be providing one. Keep asking or have a family member or friend/colleague present with you.

7 Have a Circle

It's a good idea to have a circle of friends and to connect with the people around you; it's a lot harder to intervene when you're a stranger.

Create a system of safety around you. Find and connect with community organizations around you.

9 Report, Don't Record

Recording incidents on your phone may not be helpful if you want to use those as legal evidence. Recording someone without consent may have an adverse impact. If you're recording conversations with your boss or colleague, you might be breaching your professional code.

Calling a police to report abuse may be a better idea. If you just record instead of calling the police, it may not be useful in the end.

11 Stay Anonymous

If you want to report a health and safety issue at your workplace, you can do so anonymously. Do not share this with too many colleagues or people around you, so that your boss is not able to identify who made the report. Always ensure your safety.

6 Document It and Stay Connected

If you're unsure if you've been bullied or harassed, talk to a friend or colleague you trust. Write down all the details and keep documenting in case you need those later. Sometimes we forget as time goes on. Take detailed notes of what has happened. You want to have some sort of a paper trail of what happened. You may record yourself on your phone (speaking), or write an email to yourself, or write down in a journal.

8 Safeguard Personal Business

If you use a company phone, you should keep personal business out of that phone because they own that phone. Also be careful of what you're putting out on the internet. There are consequences of what you share online. Employers and managers, who hire people, check your online presence.

10 Talk About It

Instead of secretly recording a conversation, have a conversation with your employer or supervisor. Prepare yourself well for that conversation and write down a message summarizing what you talked about so there is a paper trail.

12 Stand Firm

If your employers gaslight you, it might be a way to silence you. Or, they may want you to take the issue less seriously. Don't believe them or take that as an indication that your complaint is not valid. Record the details (what time, who said it to you, etc.)



Additional Resources

12 Workplace

Health and Safety:

Tips and Resources for Racialized Women in BC

The hard part about harassment is that it is a slow and long process.

WSBC uses legal definitions and follows certain policies that often do not match the real life complexities.

Even if the systems don't acknowledge something, that doesn't mean that you didn't experience that or it didn't happen.

Trust yourself and your instinct and take care of yourself.



Additional Resources

Resources that can help you with information and support if you experience health and safety challenges at your workplace:

- Workers' Advisers Office is independent from WorkSafe BC and they can provide support you with your claim: <u>Workers' Advisers Office Province of British Columbia</u>
- If you think WSBC is being unfair to you, you can complain or report about it to their Issues Resolution (formerly Fair Practices) Office: https://www.worksafebc.com/en/about-us/fairness-privacy/issue-resolution-office
- If you witness or experience a racist incident you can call the Racist Incident Helpline to receive support in more than 240 languages. Dial (toll-free) 1-833-457-5463
- If you're a Temporary Foreign Worker and need legal support, please contact <u>Migrant Workers Center</u>
- If you want to learn about your privacy rights at work, check this out: <u>Your privacy rights at work | People's Law</u>
- British Columbia's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner: https://bchumanrights.ca/human-rights/
- More often than not, human trafficking is worker exploitation. If you experience work exploitation (not getting paid or forced to do unpaid work or violation of other rights), please call: Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline (1-833-900-1010)

You may contact other agencies or systems such as, Human Rights Tribunal, police (911), Employment Standards BC, Resilience BC, SALCBC (if you're a South Asian, but if not you'll be directed to appropriate places).



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