

Migrant women and the EU labour market

Overcoming double discrimination

SUMMARY

Migrant women play an increasingly important socio-economic role in the European Union (EU). Once mostly seen as partners joining migrant men, foreign-born women increasingly migrate alone in search of work. Globally, although around half of migrants are nowadays women, their integration in host societies is often problematic. This is partly due to obstacles resulting from the institutional framework of host countries.

A migrant woman's status – i.e. whether she is legally or irregularly resident – is likely to shape her migration experience. Those who migrate for work are expected to 'fill the gaps' in the labour market. Often this means working in low-paid and unregulated sectors of the economy, where they are likely to be over-qualified. Employment and legal status are inter-related: both have an impact on the migrant woman's access to public services. Yet many migrant women, especially those with young children, face barriers to accessing the labour market. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) confirms that migrant women are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive than any other group in the EU labour market.

While EU legal instruments prohibit discrimination based on sex or race, both the European Parliament and civil society organisations point to the lack of a gender dimension in EU policies. Most EU Member States' national integration policies do not prioritise migrant women, although some address them as a way to promote gender equality. Many countries have acknowledged the need for more gender-sensitive policies and initiated good practices focused on helping migrant women access the labour market and integrate in society.



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Context

Migration to Europe from third countries has been substantial in recent decades, and it plays a significant role in shaping the demographics of the European Union's (EU) Member States and hence of the EU as a whole.

According to [Eurostat](#), on 1 January 2021, there were 447.2 million people living in the EU, of whom 23.7 million (5.3 %) non-EU citizens. Meanwhile, some 13.7 million EU citizens were living in another EU Member State. In absolute terms, the largest number of non-nationals living in the EU Member States on this date was [observed](#) in Germany (10.6 million people), Spain (5.4 million), France and Italy (both 5.2 million). Non-nationals in these four Member States collectively represented 70.3 % of the total number of non-nationals living in all EU Member States, while the same four countries had a 57.6 % share of the EU's population. In relative terms, the highest share of non-nationals compared to other EU countries on this date was in Luxembourg, where they accounted for 47.1 % of the total population. A high proportion of third-country nationals (above 10 % of the resident population) were also reported in Malta, Cyprus, Austria, Estonia, Latvia, Ireland, Germany, Belgium and Spain, whereas the lowest share was observed in Romania (less than 1 % of the population).

In addition to the above trend, in 2022 the EU witnessed a sharp rise in the number of new asylum applications. According to [Eurostat](#) reports, 881 220 first-time asylum seekers applied for protection in the EU that year, up 64 % compared with 2021. Family migration also [increased](#) and remained the largest category of inflows, accounting for more than four in 10 new permanent migrants to the OECD countries (including all EU Member States).

Proportion of female migrants

Women make up around half of migrants worldwide. According to United Nations (UN) [estimates](#), 51.9 % of global migrants in 2020 were men and 48.1 % were women. Again in 2020, the population of the EU-27 plus Norway was 452 687 496, of which 51 % were women, with their share in Member States varying between 49 % and 53 %. While in most Member States men slightly [outnumbered](#) women among migrants that same year, some countries, such as Cyprus, France and Ireland, made an exception. In 2020 again, third country nationals represented 5 % of the population (up 1 % since 2016). Unlike the overall population, slightly more third-country nationals were men (51 %).

There are new trends in the migration of women to the EU countries. In the past, most women travelled to Europe with their partners or to join them. International [migration trends](#) show that nowadays almost as many women as men migrate to and within Europe. Migration research has traditionally centred on the experience of the male migrant, only recognising women as secondary reunification migrants. Now women often migrate alone in search of work. Some of them arrive irregularly in the EU, while others arrive regularly but then fall into irregularity, often because there are gendered barriers to formal labour market. This may push them to the informal labour market and towards jobs considered 'traditionally female', such as domestic helpers, carers or hospitality workers. As workers sending [remittances](#) abroad, migrant women play an increasingly important socio-economic role in both sending and receiving countries.

Ukrainian refugees

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 triggered a dramatic increase in the number of displaced persons. UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) estimates indicate that by April 2023, over 8 million individual refugees had been recorded across Europe, most of them initially fleeing Ukraine to neighbouring EU countries such as Poland (1.6 million), Romania (126 711), Slovakia (113 702) and Hungary (34 248). At the same time, there have been many cross-border movements back to Ukraine. The UNHCR [reports](#) that between 28 February 2022 and April 2023, the authorities counted over 11 million crossings towards Ukraine, including back-and-forth movements. According to [UN Women](#), it is estimated that 90 % of those who fled are women

and children, as most men aged 18–60 are required to stay behind under martial law. As war-fleeing Ukrainians are one of the largest groups of third-country nationals living in the EU, many seek to reach the [Ukrainian diaspora](#) already existing in the EU. [Data](#) also shows that before the war, over 80 % of the annual new arrivals settled in the five EU Member States that host 80 % of the Ukrainian diaspora in the EU: Poland, Italy, Czechia, Germany and Spain.

The EU moved swiftly to offer political, financial and humanitarian [assistance to Ukraine](#) and its residents within and outside the country's borders. The EU also enacted, for the first time, the [Temporary Protection Directive](#), which provides a set of harmonised rights for the beneficiaries in all EU Member States. However, some of the main host countries struggled to cope with the sheer scale of the refugee influx. On 3 May 2022, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia addressed a [joint statement](#) to the European Commission, asking for additional funding and more flexible spending rules, to be able to host all newcomers. Indeed, countries with a high number of refugees and asylum seekers not only need to organise their reception and access to services, such as housing, language courses and healthcare, but must also make greater efforts to promote their integration into their societies and labour markets.

The specific situation of Ukrainian refugees was also highlighted in a European Parliament [legislative resolution](#) of 18 October 2022 on the proposal for a Council decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States. The Parliament proposed amendments to further emphasise the need to provide Ukrainian women with 'sufficient support for housing and childcare provisions to facilitate their inclusion'.

Status affecting integration

How well a migrant woman will integrate is largely dependent on her legal status. Migrants legally resident and employed in the EU stand the best chance of integrating in the host society. Integration of women arriving in the EU for family reunification – regulated by [Directive 2003/86/EC](#) – is a more complex issue. As the [majority](#) of arriving partners are women – globally, two thirds of family migrants are [estimated](#) to be women and girls – they are particularly affected.

The directive recognises the necessity to 'create socio-cultural stability facilitating the integration of third-country nationals'. In reality, it may contribute to creating a situation where a woman, unemployed and socially excluded, maintains a harmful relationship out of fear of expulsion.

Family reunification – Directive 2003/86/EC

The legal status of the arriving spouse or unmarried partner is dependent on their sponsor (the inviting partner).

Only after 5 years is he or she entitled to an autonomous residence permit. It may be refused if the family relationship has been terminated (e.g. through divorce).

The situation of irregular migrants is still more insecure, as they face expulsion or detention at any moment and can only work on the informal market. [Directive 2004/81/EC](#) makes it possible for those who have fallen victim to human trafficking to be granted a residence permit and thus to integrate in an EU country. Member States can extend the scope of this directive to third-country nationals who have been the subject of an action to facilitate irregular migration. Nevertheless, residence permits are granted only to those who cooperate with the competent authorities in the fight against related criminal activities.

Integration of migrant women on the EU labour market

The integration of migrant women is a complex process. It depends on the host country, the migrant community to which the woman belongs, and her willingness to accept the social and cultural norms of mainstream society. In particular, women in some migrant communities experience marginalisation and social exclusion. For instance, women from some devout Muslim communities may be [discouraged](#) to participate in training or unable to attend mixed-gender programmes.

Coercion and violence may occur, sometimes taking the form of forced marriages, honour crimes or female genital mutilation. The host country may exacerbate migrant women's exclusion by creating barriers to their access to employment, public services and economic independence. Those barriers may result from regulations or policies, or from the way host-country institutions happen to function. Considering that migrant women often risk [double discrimination](#) – as migrants and as women – the likelihood of such barriers appearing increases.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) confirms in its sectoral brief [Gender and Migration](#) that migrant women are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive than any other group in the EU labour market. It appears that whether migrant women participate in the labour market is strongly linked to their reason for migration. Women who move for family reasons have lower employment rates than those who migrated for work or studies. In the specific case of refugee women, their employment rate was 45% on average compared to 62% for refugee men. Some studies suggest that unemployment is especially common among migrant women from countries where women's employment rates are very low.

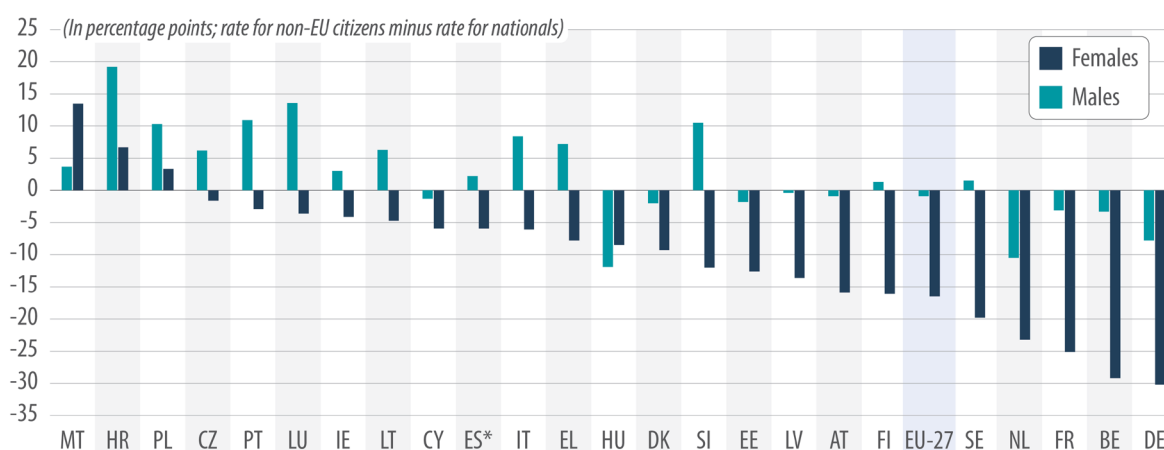
[Research](#) suggests that for women with young children, the employment rate is significantly lower among migrant women than among non-migrant women. In addition, migrant women have been disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, for instance, through job loss, additional care and domestic work or increased exposure when providing front-line services.

Unemployment rates

In 2021, in around half of EU countries (14), women had a higher [unemployment rate](#) than men. This is also true for the EU as a whole, where the gender unemployment gap has widened from 0.3 percentage points (pp) in 2009 to 0.7 pp in 2021. The unemployment rate in the EU stood at 6.7% for men and 7.4% for women in 2021. In the case of [migrants](#), the unemployment rate was also higher for third-country migrant women than for other women and men with a comparable education level. In 2021, 22% of foreign-born men and 25% of foreign-born women in the EU [reported](#) that they faced obstacles in finding a suitable job in their host country.

Eurostat data for 2022 confirms that the gap between the unemployment rates of non-EU citizens and nationals in 2022 was almost 1 pp less for men and almost 17 pp less for women (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1 – Difference between activity rates of non-EU citizens and nationals, 20-64 years of age, in 2022 (percentage points; rate for non-EU citizens minus rate for nationals)



Note: no data for Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia.

* Definition differs for Spain.

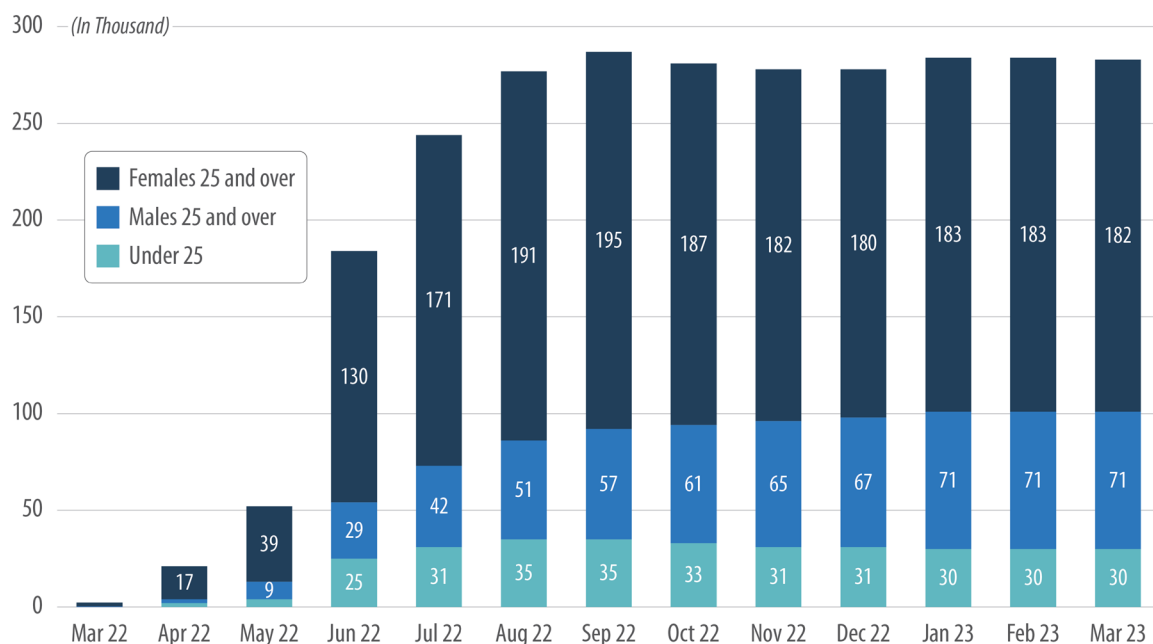
Data source: Eurostat, [Activity rates by sex, age and citizenship \(%\)](#), 2022 (calculation by the author).

Given the specific situation of Ukrainians, in February 2023 there were 279 000 refugees from Ukraine, beneficiaries of the EU temporary protection scheme, who had been registered as unemployed in the 21 countries that provided the relevant data to Eurostat (see Figure 2 below). Most countries also broke down this data by age and sex: of these refugees, 179 000 were women aged 25 and over, while 70 000 were men aged 25 and over. Of the overall number of refugees, 30 000 refugees under the age of 25 were registered as unemployed.

In general, [young people](#) (18-24 years old) 'born outside the EU were much more likely (21 %) than natives (12.5 %) to be "neither in employment nor in education and training" ([NEETs](#)) in 2019, especially migrant girls and young women (25.9%)'.

A recent European Migration Network (EMN) study [indicates](#) that when it comes to self-employment among third-country nationals, there is a clear divide in favour of male migrants across all EU Member States and Norway in the years 2016 to 2020. On average, 69 % of the self-employed migrant population is male (against 67 % of males in the total population being self-employed), varying from 64 % in Spain to 77 % in both Belgium and France). Only in Cyprus in 2016, did self-employed female migrants outnumber their male counterparts, but subsequently their share decreased dramatically from 55 % in 2016 to 24 % in 2020. A less significant yet overall downward trend can also be seen across the remaining Member States, where the average share of self-employed migrant women decreased from 32 % to 30 %.

Figure 2 – Refugees from Ukraine in the EU-27, registered as unemployed, by age and sex, in 2022 (in thousands)



Data deliveries per month: March 2022 (13 countries), April 2022 (18 countries), May 2022 (21 countries), June 2022 (23 countries), July 2022 (22 countries), August 2022 (22 countries), September 2022 (22 countries), October 2022 (21 countries), November 2022 (21 countries), December 2022 (21 countries), January 2023 (20 countries), February 2023 (19 countries).

BE, DE and PL: Register data are available for Ukrainian citizens but not specifically for refugees under the EU temporary protection scheme. Data are estimated by Eurostat.

Data source: Eurostat, [Unemployment statistics](#).

Sectors

Many third-country migrant women who find employment tend to work in low-skilled, insecure and badly remunerated jobs. In particular, they work in sectors experiencing growing demand for, and permanent shortages of, labour: domestic care, cleaning, catering, etc. This often entails:

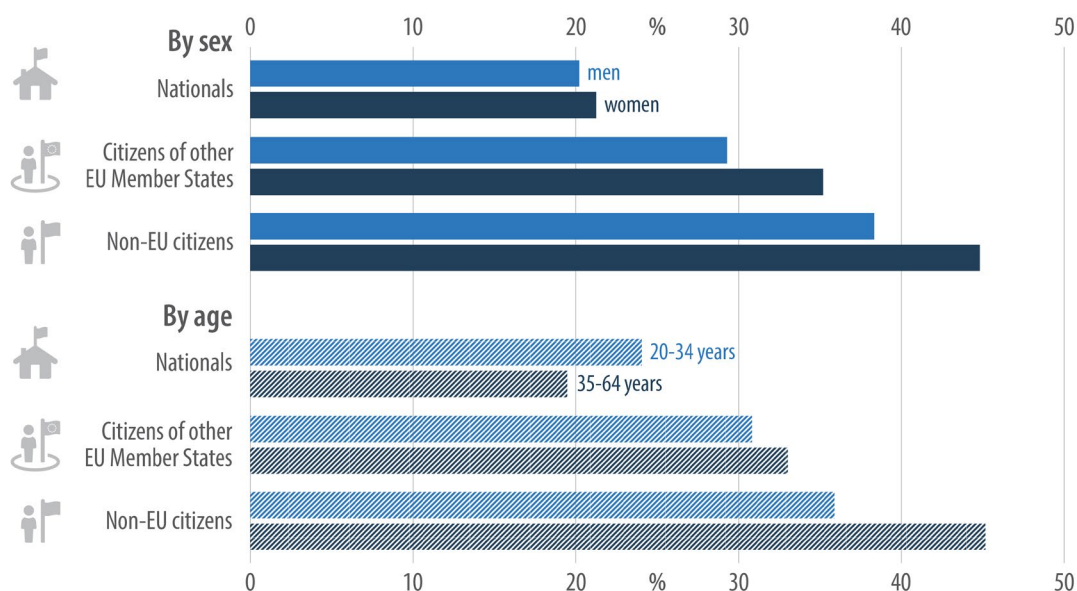
- lack of or limited, labour law protection;
- likelihood of discrimination and exploitation by their employers. Domestic workers are a particularly vulnerable category;
- no entitlement to contribution-based social benefits, or low contributions that entail low pensions;
- restricted access to public services, such as healthcare or childcare.

While a significant number of migrant women end up in the domestic work sector, they may have disparate educational levels and skills. Over-qualification, although not uncommon in this line of work, seems to be more widespread for women with a migrant background and is now increasingly paid attention to from a gendered aspect. Migrant women working in the domestic sector are often considered 'low skilled', as the specific tasks they perform are perceived as a 'natural extension' of their role within the family, which does not require any new professional skills. These tasks typically consist of cooking, cleaning, gardening, childcare, tending to the sick, etc. Contrary to these popular perceptions, [academics](#) argue that these women are not 'low skilled' but 'low income'. They link this phenomenon to the feminisation of poverty theory, as illustrated by the decrease in pay and prestige associated with, for instance, being a teacher or a doctor, both having become a predominantly female profession. They claim that this theory is still at play in the EU, where 'low paid' professions are linked to the level of skills required.

Over-qualification

The European Commission [estimates](#) that one in five highly educated non-EU migrant women is overqualified for her job. This process is known as 'deskilling'. In 2019, among the working age population (aged 20-64), 40.7 % of migrant women were likely to be overqualified for their jobs, compared to 21.1 % among native women.

Figure 3 – Over-qualification rate in the EU by citizenship (% of population aged 20 to 64, 2020)



Data source: Eurostat, [Migrants more likely over-qualified than nationals](#), July 2021.

Research [demonstrates](#) that highly qualified migrant women who are family migrants (i.e. reunite with their partner) experience the lowest level of career wellbeing, especially if they are mothers and come from countries outside the EU. When all these factors come together, the wellbeing of those women is shown to decrease as regards not only their career but also their financial satisfaction, subjective wellbeing and social relationships.

To resolve this situation, some [suggest](#) adopting a more [intersectional](#) approach and looking into all the interlinked causes that create labour market disadvantages for migrant women and limit their opportunities to find and keep a job that corresponds to their qualification.

Towards a gendered approach in EU integration policy

This policy area was first [addressed](#) at EU level in 2004 through the [common basic principles for immigrant integration policy in the EU](#). The EU has since adopted several policy documents, but it is important to note that migrant integration remains primarily a national competence. The EU can contribute through a large variety of measures to incentivise and support national as well as regional and local authorities and civil society in their efforts to promote integration.

Integration is a multidimensional process that cuts through a number of policy areas. Following the [European Agenda on Migration](#), in June 2016 the Commission presented its [action plan](#) on the integration of third-country nationals, with a view to strengthening the common approach across policy areas and involving all relevant actors. In line with policy developments, the [new pact on migration and asylum](#) was presented in 2020, which also paved the way to the new [action plan](#) for integration and inclusion 2021-2027.

The new action plan builds on the 2016 one and targets the same main areas of integration, namely:

- ensuring inclusive education and training;
- improving employment opportunities and skills recognition;
- promoting access to health services;
- facilitating access to adequate and affordable housing.

In addition, the 2021-2027 plan [focuses](#) more on:

- ensuring inclusion for all, including through targeted and tailored support;
- enhancing migrant participation;
- mainstreaming gender and ensuring the inclusion of women;
- building more partnerships with various integration stakeholders;
- developing closer cooperation with regional and local authorities;
- placing more emphasis on long-term integration, including through funding.

The action plan acknowledges the double discrimination of migrant women and girls as compared to migrant men and boys and the structural barriers they face along their integration path, including having to confront different kinds of stereotypes.

Taking into account the war in Ukraine and the fact that a majority of Ukrainian refugees in the EU are women and children, it is especially important for policymakers and authorities to [consider](#) how to put in place 'gender responsive' and 'gender sensitive' policies in line with the newcomers' specific needs without reproducing gender stereotypes.

In its [resolution](#) of 5 July 2022 on women's poverty in Europe, the European Parliament calls for a 'gender-sensitive analysis that takes into account intersecting forms of discrimination on the grounds of characteristics such as socioeconomic background, migrant and ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression'. In a [resolution](#) of 6 July 2022, Parliament addresses more specifically the socio-economic situation of women of African, Middle-Eastern, Latin-American and Asian descent, concluding that young women from diasporas and marginalised groups often work in care services, are likely to face discrimination on the labour market, are overqualified, and are underemployed for their jobs. The Parliament deplores the structural barriers faced by Roma and Muslim women, among others, and calls for awareness raising to combat discrimination and for ways to empower women and girls and facilitate their transition to the labour market.

Nevertheless, the current Member States' national legislation and measures targeting integration of women leave room for improvement. A 2022 [report](#) by the European Migration Network (EMN) on

the integration of migrant women reveals that a majority of EU Member States have integration policies in place, yet only a few specifically address women in these policies. In most EU Member States, the integration of migrant women is not currently a national policy priority, although some have prioritised the topic, mostly to improve gender equality.

Member States overall acknowledge the need for specific integration-related policies tailored to migrant women. Most EU Member States have implemented specific policies that address aspects related to migrant women's integration, such as labour market access and civic integration, followed by access to language training, education and health. Other specific policies address housing, protection from violence, prevention of human trafficking and protection of women from falling victim to human trafficking, countering of anti-discrimination and racism, and integration through sport.

Several Member States are planning new policies or changes to existing ones to further enhance the integration of migrant women. Finland is carrying out a comprehensive reform of its integration policy, with a stronger focus on the integration of people outside the labour market. France is planning several measures to facilitate migrant women's job search and training opportunities by offering adequate childcare services. On an even more positive note, a number of integration measures are being applied across the Member States, which are either gender sensitive or apply the concept of intersectionality. Other measures concern other types of assistance such as psychosocial or parenting support. For example, Germany has been offering vocational training followed by a work placement to migrant women with family responsibilities since 2015. By 2021, the project had already reached 16 000 mothers. Since 2013, Cyprus has had a programme offering multicultural, awareness raising and sports events, social support through cooperation with schools, childcare services, as well as language and other courses. While the programme targets all newcomers, 62 % of participants have been women. The Neighbourhood Mothers project, implemented in Austria and Finland and based on a Danish model, aims to increase the self-empowerment and wellbeing of migrant women. The idea is to train migrant women to provide support to other women on their integration path.

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