



Introducing perpetrator counseling in Western Balkan countries: The challenge of gender-transformative action in a patriarchal society

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ABSTRACT: In cooperation with two locally based NGO initiatives in the strongly patriarchal contexts of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania, professional psychosocial counseling of perpetrators has been introduced. Through targeted skills development with professionals from psychosocial working fields and opening of two men's counseling services, a foundation has been laid for future system-integrated perpetrator treatment programs. Key lessons learned address the necessary basic prerequisites for successful perpetrator counseling. Experience shows that standardized training programs and proceedings for psychosocial perpetrator counseling are not sufficient to promote sustainable changes in the gender-related value and norm system of perpetrators of violence. For the counselors themselves, a personal reflection of their own experiences and socialization with gender, masculinity and violence is an important gender-transformative learning process that forms an important basis for empathic, competent and sustainable anti-violence counseling of perpetrators. The attentive consideration of intercultural dynamics combined with a clear human rights based approach are further relevant factors contributing to successful counseling.

KEYWORDS: Gender-based violence, domestic violence perpetrators, psychosocial treatment, counseling skills, gender-transformative learning



*If we want to build a ship, we must know how to put it together.
We also need to learn how to navigate it, but we also have to deal
with our own fears, resistances, insecurities and sometimes our
own overestimation before we are ready to start the journey.*
– A male counselor in Albania on the process of learning and developing perpetrator counseling work

This paper deals with the challenges of introducing professional and context-sensitive perpetrator¹ counseling services in a region that is marked by a past and present with high rates of violence and a strong patriarchal culture. It explains the process and learning in the context of training male professionals to counsel domestic violence perpetrators and set up men's counseling services in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania. It shows the key elements required for effective, gender-transformative work with men who use violence in a context that until now has not witnessed any men-focused approaches, apart from judicial sanctioning. A short description of the working contexts of the two countries helps to set the framework for this work. In the second section, the conceptual framework for perpetrator counseling and gender-transformative work is explained and grounded in theory around gender, men and development. The third section describes and analyzes the experiences of counselors in the two countries and leads to conclusions that highlight the relevance of applying a gender-transformative lens to perpetrator counseling work in a systematic, but at the same time contextualized and self-reflective, manner.

The contexts of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania: patriarchy, post-conflict and transition

Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania are both countries in South Eastern Europe with a deep rooted patriarchal tradition. Male dominance over women is enshrined in the family and in clan systems from birth. Women are perceived as the property of the family, first in their families of origin, and later in the families of their husband.² Both countries have gone through a period of communism that significantly impacted them. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, as part of former Yugoslavia, the communist system was established after World War II under the Tito regime. In Albania, un-

der the dictatorship of Enver Hodza, communism completely isolated the country from the outer world from 1944 to 1990. The fall of communism only five years after the death of Enver Hodza in 1985 turned Albania into a young democracy that is still marked by party thinking, nepotism and dominant power structures along political lines. The brutal war from 1992–1995 in Bosnia-Herzegovina that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia put an end to the communist phase. The war was ended through the Dayton agreement in 1995, when a new country with a tripartite state structure and a divided territory came into existence. Both countries are still marked by this system change as well as different crises. Political disruption, economic hardship, rising poverty and high internal and external migration rates continue to destabilize community cohesion. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the effects of the war can still be felt today. Men as well as women have experienced heavy violence during the war, but only a few of them can share their stories with their loved ones. A culture of silence has been established and keeps traumatization and its effects at a high level. Furthermore, many men have been unable to regain their position as breadwinners and heads of household, and suffer from disrupted identities and a questioning of their masculinity. In Albania, the vacuum that remained after the fall of the communist system had a reinforcing effect on traditional patriarchal values. In combination with high unemployment rates but persisting pressure on their roles as heads of households and family representatives, men tend to over-articulate their dominance and stereotypical masculine behavior over women.

Both countries have very high rates of domestic violence, with some of the incidents even resulting in the death of the victim.³ While a substantial legal basis for protection of families from violence has been created and put into force in the last ten years, implementation is still lagging behind and is mainly in the hands of NGO-initiatives, without any government funding. A dozen shelters and counseling centers for victims of domestic violence have been built by dedicated women's organizations, and important professional capacities in psychosocial counseling, psychotherapeutic work, and legal aid among other interventions, have been developed in this framework. It was only in 2009 that the leading organizations addressing gender-based violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania began to reflect on the necessity of addressing the root causes of the violence in many families, by starting to work with the violent men.

Basic assumptions about perpetrator counseling work

Perpetrator programs are important elements of an integrated and comprehensive approach to preventing and combating violence against women, which, in turn, should be part of a comprehensive national policy or strategy. Since the 1980s, work with perpetrators that is rooted in women's safety and domestic violence prevention has increasingly become recognized as a key element of domestic violence support services (Hester & Lilley, 2014).

Perpetrator programs aim at holding men accountable for having used violence and for ending their use of violence while also believing in their potential to change. As summarized by Taylor & Barker (2013, p. 5), "Perpetrator programs are characterized by three common features: 1) a theoretical orientation (i.e. what they believe ends men's use of violence); 2) the voluntary or mandatory nature of men's participation (i.e. the extent of the justice system's role); and 3) the degree of coordination with related health sector services, the criminal justice system, and the community, referred to as coordinated community response (CCR)". Cognitive-behavioral, psychotherapeutic, and gender-based approaches are the most common approaches and theories used and combined in programs for violence perpetrators. Violence is seen as a learned behavior that can be unlearned. Most men who have used violence do not show evidence of psychological or personality disorders, and most programs require or encourage men to accept responsibility for past use of violence. The majority of interventions are also framed within a gender analysis of the belief system in which men feel entitled to control women in a relationship. In leading perpetrators to accept responsibility for their violence, it is crucial for perpetrator programs to focus on overcoming belief systems that tolerate, justify or outright condone violence against women (Hester and Lilley, 2014).

The broad program review conducted by Taylor & Barker reveals that programs for men who use violence vary greatly in the numbers of men they reach. "In North America and Europe, some programs admit several hundred men each year, whereas others may be run by a private psychologist, for instance, who hold one small group per year. Furthermore, programs throughout the world show differences in terms of duration, recruitment and attrition mechanisms (volunteer or court referrals and monitoring), the role of justice systems, and contact with

the partner.” (Taylor & Barker, 2013, p. 7). Also recruitment mechanisms can vary from mandated referrals to voluntary referrals that rely more on collaboration with social services and some start as voluntary programs and are later linked to the justice system. Evaluations show a need for follow-up after program completion to monitor men’s progress beyond treatment, while the provision of such follow-up has proven to be a common challenge (Taylor & Barker, 2013; Texeira & Maia, 2011).

Evidence has affirmed that the effectiveness of perpetrator programs depends on the program’s degree of integration among complementary services and support systems (Hester & Lilley, 2014; Taylor & Barker, 2013). It is suggested that these services should work in tandem through a coordinated community response. This offers multiple pathways for men to enter programs by broadening referral, support and accountability mechanisms.

A gender-transformative approach to address violence from men’s side

Gender-transformative approaches have been identified as an essential measure for a more equal distribution of power in gender relations and as a key to reduced gender-based violence (Greene & Levack, 2010). This entails introducing alternative forms of masculinity and redefining manhood in a way that new perceptions about relationships, intimacy, women, shared responsibility and happiness can result. It is also important to examine how gender is tied to societal tolerance of violence and norms around masculinity, and how a man’s lack of attainment of social power in other spheres (work, community, etc.) influences his social entitlement and use (or non-use) of violence with an intimate partner (Taylor & Barker, 2013).

Counseling work with perpetrators of violence addresses men who are used to expressing their feelings of powerlessness and helplessness by using violence, and who consider their violent behavior legitimate. It addresses men who have internalized the dominant values and norms as a reflection of their cultural and societal embeddedness. Masculinity is marked by historical and biological influences and by the specific situations within which men find themselves.⁴

Growing social inequalities in the globalized world affect men’s and women’s lives in manifold ways, and in spite of very different experiences of fundamental

changes in livelihoods, both sexes experience serious disempowerment at various levels. “Although in the vast majority of countries, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of material, social, and civil disadvantage, trends suggest that an increasing number of men, especially among the young and poor, are subject to mounting vulnerability and marginalization” (Chant and Gutmann, 2000, p. 1). If one draws a more differentiated picture of men’s lived experiences, it becomes visible and clear that patriarchy as well as globalization disadvantage men as well (Calkin, 2013). These vulnerabilities and levels of marginalization very often lead to increased dominant behavior towards women, and violent behavior as an expression of power and authority.

Working with perpetrators means not only focusing on their lived masculinity expressed through power and force, but also paying attention to their own vulnerabilities and sense of marginalization as men in hegemonic patriarchal systems. In so doing, it is important to recognize the interlinkages between dominant masculine norms, experienced vulnerability, and violent behavior. Working with perpetrators requires carefully understanding their living environment, their experiences, and their reality. It includes talking about their vulnerabilities and their own needs, about their fears, resistances, insecurities and over-estimations. The counseling work supports the intention and the process of change, by supporting men to deal with their own perceptions, by addressing emotions, and finally through in-depth work on self-awareness and responsibility. This path is very individual, and needs to be understood and recognized as a delicate and also vulnerable advancement.

If counseling work enters specific cultural and societal contexts, practitioners must be aware of the image of masculinity that men have learned through socialization. Men carry their convictions about right and wrong deeply rooted inside them. During counseling, they are offered the possibility to become aware of the inequalities between women and men, but also about the inequalities and vulnerabilities they experience as a man in a society that imposes its own rules and expectations.

In this sense, gender-transformative means:

- to address men not only through their dominant expression of masculinity, but also through their own vulnerabilities and needs;
- to make them recognize and understand the oppressive effects of gender inequalities on women, but also on themselves;
- to help them understand that they must not conform to dominant forms of

masculinity, because it is about themselves, and not the others;

- to draw on men's responsibilities from a human rights based perspective and help them define spaces for change;
- to empower men to take action at an individual but also societal level and accompany them in this process.

This is not only valid for clients, but equally for those who offer counseling and perpetrator treatment programs. Also these men are dealing with their perceptions of being a man and of masculinity. This aspect is important and has been a guiding element in the work and experiences made in the Western Balkan region during the setting up of first perpetrator treatment services.

First grounds for developing work with perpetrators in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania

In Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania, development of services and treatment programs for perpetrators was initiated in the frame of IAMANEH Switzerland's Western Balkan program, building on a decade old process of developing and implementing mostly NGO-led services for victims' protection. The experience that women-only focused interventions were insufficient to address the root causes and to reduce domestic violence in a sustainable manner prompted the recognition to start working with men and boys. IAMANEH Switzerland is a specialized Swiss NGO working in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights in Western Africa and the Western Balkan region. Working jointly with local women's organizations, they identified additional intervention mechanisms on the side of the perpetrators as being indispensable for the long term protection of women and children enduring violence and exploitation. In 2008, they started the pioneer work of introducing perpetrator counseling in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania. The newly created services for perpetrators are based on well-grounded assessments. They adopt an integrated approach that also incorporates governmental and non-governmental actors such as police, social and health system, the judiciary.⁵ The recently adopted laws for protection from domestic violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Albania build an important reference frame.⁶

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, a standardized training program based on a Dutch model with a group treatment approach⁷ has provided 25 professionals from governmental and non-governmental services with specialized skills for working with

perpetrators. The training lasted six months and comprised six modules of three days each. In a second, partially parallel step, four trained male professionals took the initiative to establish a Men's Centre in 2010 under the umbrella of the local NGO Buducnost in Modrica (Republika Sprska), which has been the main provider in victim's protection in this region for the last ten years. The first aim was to counsel perpetrators of violence who come voluntarily, however counseling is also provided to mandated clients referred by the justice system.

In Albania, a three-year training process for future counselors for perpetrators started in 2012 with a group of twelve male professionals who had a background in psychology or social work. The training consisted of six, three-day training modules, and four in-between coaching days. The focus is on individual perpetrator counseling work based on a cognitive-behavioral approach that places the responsibility for dealing with one's own thinking and acting in central focus. The strategies of legitimization and minimization of violence are made visible. Alternative solutions are worked out on the basis of a personal intention building for changing one's behavior, and its goals include the development of empathy and responsible thinking.

The first Men's Counseling Office in Tirana opened in 2013 under the leadership of the Counseling Line for Abused Women and Girls. It was the first center to offer counseling services and protection for victims of domestic violence in the country. A second men's counseling office was later opened in 2014 in the north of the country by the male sub-branch of Woman to Woman, a formerly women's NGO offering domestic violence prevention and protection services in the rural northern parts of Albania. Referral rates in the first three years for both areas were still low (from zero to three per month), but grew slowly after intense awareness raising work in public services. Intense lobbying with the justice system is ongoing in order to enforce law implementation and systematize the referral of perpetrators to the newly established specialized counseling services.

From a standardized treatment program to deep relational work: processes and experiences in Bosnia-Herzegovina

The process of setting up the first Men's Centre in Bosnia was motivated by the termination of a six month standardized training cycle for perpetrator treatment. Four

young social workers who finished the training took the initiative to set up a first counseling service for men and youngsters with violence problems in their community. As a starting point, they conducted a survey of the male population of Modrica in order to find out more about beliefs and attitudes of men with regard to violence, about the situation of men themselves and their problem solving behavior. The physical presence of the male counsellors and some mobilized volunteers in the streets of Modrica created high visibility and attention for the upcoming new center.

Once the Men's Center opened, the young team was immediately confronted with the non-application of the law that guides sentenced perpetrators of domestic violence directly to psychosocial treatment. It was difficult to form perpetrator treatment groups and men showed high levels of resistance in coming to the center for perpetrator counseling of their free will.⁸

Reflecting on the survey results, and following the felt needs for low level entry points and opportunities for trust building at the center, the team started enlarging the service offer.⁹ The Men's Center was turned into a men's place and meeting point where men could meet and drink coffee together, where they could consult the internet and read newspapers, and where educational workshops and study groups were offered along topics that were of interest to men and their living situation. The more the team became involved with the men frequenting the center, more new activities were developed, responding to the problems and vulnerabilities of the men that were encountered. The center's service provision was further expanded with resource-oriented handicraft workshops and outdoor anti-stress activities, as well as offers of individual counseling in social, legal and psychological aspects.

Dealing with men on an interpersonal, individual level made the team start dealing with the manifold problems and concerns of these men. Together they started a process of questioning and reflecting on the existing values and norms in their society (for example, regarding gender, masculinity, authority and obedience). This was prompted by questions such as whether it is acceptable to beat a child, or whether men should be allowed to show their frustrations in front of others. A process of mutual understanding and learning between counselors and clients began. While at first they were trained professionals offering a standardized treatment program, they later became involved counselors who entered into deeper relational work with their clients.

The learning process has only started. A recent evaluation has confirmed the

important development process of the center, but also identified some gaps that require attention. Getting deeply involved with men at the center and following their broad needs as vulnerable men in a war-torn society opens access to deeper understanding of masculinity. It also provides the first grounds for questioning existing values and norms, and for engaging in gender-transformative action. However, the broad offer of services around the manifold needs of the clients easily distracts the attention from the issue of violence and the direct addressing of, and working on, individual crisis situations. For this to be possible, the counselors themselves need to work on and understand their own mechanisms of dealing with crises and to find a language to describe and talk about these experiences. Such a process needs time and tight follow up; first on the level of training and skills development of the counselors themselves, and later on the level of anti-violence counseling work with men who use violence.

Working on oneself as a prerequisite for working with other men: processes and experiences in Albania

In Albania, the training of future counselors for perpetrators has been a three-year process with a group of twelve men who were interested in the topic of violence counseling. All of them had a university degree in psychology or social work and also some work experience in these fields. Many of them were either unemployed or underemployed. Their primary motivation for the training was to gain an additional qualification that would help them to find an appropriate job in a related field. The training consisted of a program with binding elements of perpetrator counseling skills, but also with deliberate space for self-reflection and process orientation.

The beginning of the joint learning process was marked by expectations and resistance. The trainees expected a structured teaching program that would be easy to adopt without having to get involved too personally. They showed resistance to dealing with their own role models. They stuck to their own learned values and norms, and argued from this cemented perspective. These tendencies showed clearly that without distinct self-reflection from the counselors' side, there is a high risk of trivializing violence. This would make changes of attitudes through the counseling process with men who use violence impossible.

The experience with men in the training process in Albania confirmed that the development of new intentions and a changing of attitudes regarding gender equality, as well as the development of zero-tolerance towards violence, requires patience. The trainer and the trainees began an intensive process of deep relational and self-awareness work. This process required a continuous adaption of the contents of the training in response to these experiences with the men, and through understanding and integrating cultural and contextual influences and imprints. The participants have continuously been confronted with their own conceptions of masculinity and society, with their own life story, and their own experiences and sensations.

Today, the certified counselors report that it was due to the continuous and repeated confrontation with how they deal with their own way of thinking and acting, with their emotions, and with their own communication patterns, that has led them to a point at which they feel empowered. They became ready to access and accompany perpetrators in a reflective, respectful and more targeted manner. In addition to the consolidated knowledge and skills for violence counseling work, the Albanian counselors highlight their personal transformation. They reported this work on themselves as the biggest benefit from the training process, and as their tool to encounter perpetrators and to accompany them in an effective way. They emphasize their improved capability for relationship building.

Conclusions

Viewing perpetrator counseling approaches through a gender-transformative lens

Both experiences in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Albania confirm the benefit of a context-adapted and self-reflective development process as a fundamental basis for establishing perpetrator counseling services.¹⁰ Standardized training programs and proceedings for psychosocial perpetrator counseling taken from other contexts and applied in a rigid “handbook” manner are insufficient to promote sustainable changes in the gender related value and norm system of violent men.

Work on one’s own experiences and socialization with gender, masculinity and violence is an important gender-transformative learning process. It represents a *sine qua non* basis for empathic, competent and sustainable anti-violence coun-

selling with men using violence. Apart from reflecting on violence, reflecting on gender is an indispensable working process for both sides: the male professionals who offer counseling and the perpetrators who are being counseled.

As in all perpetrator treatment programs, content-oriented topics of violence counseling form the primary and visible roof of perpetrator intervention. They address violence in a differentiated way and help the perpetrator to become aware and reflect on different forms of violence. Seeing the violence circle as underlying pattern and understanding the effects and consequences of exposure to vio-

lence for the victims, they engage in the reconstruction of the violent incident(s), work on risk factors, emergency plans for avoiding future violence, and alternative ways of dealing with stressful situations. In this process the perpetrators are called upon to take responsibility for their own actions and to clearly decide to solve conflicts in a violence-free way.

On the other side, it is equally important to address and reflect on gender. This means promoting awareness and working on the societal and individual value and norm systems regarding gender and violence. The following key elements of gender-transformative work must be understood as fundamental for perpetrator counseling in a broader sense:

- Dealing with masculinity (How am I integrated in society as a man, which definitions and ideologies determine my identity as a man?)
- Reflecting on societal and personal norms and values (Where do I agree? With what do I conform? What would I like to change? And what do I do, if I don't agree with the values and expectations of society and want to act in a different way?)
- Changing relationships (How do I shape a relationship, what does equality mean? What changes need to be addressed from my side? What am I ready for? What are the advantages if I change my relationship towards more gender equality?)
- Training on respectful collaborative communication (How do I communicate



Fig. 1: Counseling model interlinking standard perpetrator counseling elements and gender-transformative topics

in conflict situations? How can I avoid depreciation and violation of personal borders? How can I succeed to communicate in conflict situations in a way that allows a possibility for exchange?)

- Understanding responsibility and respect (How do I manage to be respectful?)

To engage in these processes in a competent and sustainable way is not self-evident, and cannot be fixed to specific training contents. It is the interpersonal exchange and reflection about feelings and mindsets that needs to take place. Without these self-reflective elements a transformation of behavior will not, or only barely, be possible.¹¹

In order to reach out to violent men, counselors need the capability to engage in relationships.¹² They need to perceive themselves and others with the respective needs and emotions. They need to be able to express themselves and to communicate. Working with perpetrators involves a differentiated and sensitized dealing with oneself (Paul and Charura, 2015). Perpetrator counseling will be more effective when counselors have gone through these processes themselves. The effects can be seen in two directions: the involved men, who have started to reflect on and deal with their role and responsibility in a differentiated way, not only have the necessary skills and prerequisites to provide professional counseling to men who have used violence, they also engage themselves as men with changed values and norms in their society.

This paper has argued that domestic violence work with perpetrators needs a supportive framework. It is important to develop a collaborative network with public institutions and services in order to establish a coordinated community response that is binding. The more the trained counselors can step out and dialogue in a sound professional manner based on a personal experience of gender-transformative self-reflection, the more persuasiveness they can develop. This may have a multiplier role since it gives the possibility to influence and to become influential on systems level.

Endnotes

¹ 'Work with perpetrators' is an established term to denominate counselling work with violent men. The term 'perpetrator' bears the risk that violent men are only being reduced to their violent behavior and not being perceived with a holistic view. Although men become violent, they still are and remain men with other resources and capabilities.

In spite of their violent attitudes they can be caring fathers or responsible members of society. We would therefore like to enlarge the term perpetrator with the concept of ‘men who use violence’, in order not to etiquette men only as ‘perpetrators’.

- ² These gender stereotypes and beliefs are tend to be widespread in the two countries, but should in no way be generalized to all men living in these societies in order to avoid culturalization of individual behavior and experiences.
- ³ See chapters on domestic violence rates and on legislation in: INSTAT: Domestic Violence in Albania: 2013 National population-based survey (http://www.instat.gov.al/media/225815/domestic_violence_in_albania_2013.pdf) and in: Gender Equality Agency of BiH (2013): Prevalence and characteristics of violence against women in BiH (<http://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2011/01/prevalence-and-characteristics-of-violence-against-women-in-bih#view>)
- ⁴ For more theoretical background on men and masculinity in the frame of the gender equality debate, see Connell, R. (2005). Change among the gatekeepers: men, masculinities, and gender equality in the global arena. *Signs*, vol. 30 no. 3: 1801–1825.
- ⁵ As already promoted by the Duluth Model. Developed in 1980, the Duluth model (DAIP – Domestic Abuse Intervention Project) advocates a coordinated community approach to tackling domestic abuse, putting the safety of women and children at the center and requiring agencies to work together to protect victims whilst consistently holding perpetrators accountable for their abuse or violence through intervention that offers them an opportunity to change. See <http://theduluthmodel.org/about>.
- ⁶ Bosnia-Herzegovina: National Law on Gender Equality, passed in 2003 and amended in 2010 as overall frame and entity strategies and laws, among which the most important are the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence (2012) in Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Law on Protection from Violence in Families (2012) in Republika Srpska; Albania: Law ‘On Measures against Violence in Family Relations’, passed in 2006 and amended in 2012. In addition to the law “On Measures Against Violence in Family Relations” specific provisions that address crimes related to domestic violence have been added to the Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania following amendments of 2012 and 2013 (see also INSTAT 2013 and Agency for Gender Equality of BiH, 2013).
- ⁷ The training was implemented by the Society for Psychological Assistance DPP from Zagreb, Croatia, a specialized training and treatment center for violence intervention who has developed the first perpetrator intervention service based on a Dutch group treatment approach in the Western Balkan region.
- ⁸ On the issue of the link between masculine norms and help-seeking, consider different literature such as e.g. Galdas et al. (2005) or Vogel et al. (2011).
- ⁹ This strategic shift can be embedded in what in the literature is referred to as a masculine sensitive approach in terms of adapting the treatment context and setting to attract males, rather than expecting them to adapt to treatment. See also Englar-Carlson et al. (2014).
- ¹⁰ On the issue of training for practitioners that includes space to challenge own potentially harmful or biased views and the need for contextually and culturally adapted programs,

see also Rothman et al. (2003) as well as Saunders (2008) and Williams and Becker (1994)

¹¹ See also Rothman et al. (2003).

¹² The therapeutic relationship is considered to be the most significant factor in achieving positive therapeutic change. As such, it is essential that trainee and practising therapists are able to facilitate a strong working alliance with each of their clients. See also Paul and Charura, 2015.

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