

ACID VIOLENCE IN BANGLADESH : WOMEN ARE THE WORST VICTIMS

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Abstract

Bangladesh is a developing country of South East Asia which is surrounded by a number of socio-cultural and economic problems due to the century old colonial legacy. The discrimination among the males and females is very much visible here. Victimization of women is therefore found as a rude reality of Bangladesh. Though in Bangladesh many crimes are inflicted upon women, the number of incidents of acid attacks over them is alarming. It is not because of its high frequency on women, rather because of its severe impact on the human body and mind. Acid attack against women is perhaps one of the worst forms of violation of morality and legal codes in the contemporary age. Various statistical data regarding acid violence against women demonstrate that the women are still belonging to the most vulnerable state for being victims of acid attacks. It is a matter of hope that the frequency of acid attack is considerably decreasing in recent years and from 2005 to present year it is showing a decreasing trend. This crime is associated here mostly with the land, money or property related issues. Among the males children are mostly vulnerable, while young girls are mostly vulnerable among all age groups of the females. The rate of acid attacks though is decreasing in a satisfactory level, against women this rate is not yet satisfactory. Life and liberty, beauty and physical ability, dream and the reality of women are still seemingly hostage to the acid attacks.

Keywords: Women, victim, acid violence, property dispute, legal actions

Introduction

From the very beginning of human civilization crime has been remaining in every society with its own gravity or level of severity. The forms of crimes were not always same and have encountered changes over the time. With the advancement of civilization various criminal outbreaks have become apparent in different societies. Sometimes people have been involved in crimes due to their distorted psychology. Acid attack to distort the figure of a person or to cause serious bodily harm is such an offence which has become frequent in recent years. In Bangladesh acid attacks have become commonplace incidents during the last few decades. It has not been ascertained how and when acid violence took root in Bangladesh, but from newspapers we have learnt that the first reported incident occurred due to refusal of a proposal in the 1960s. Unfortunately it was not recorded officially. Later, when a popular folk-drama (jatra) artist was disfigured by acid in the

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1980s, the newspapers took up the issue and created a wide stir. In the last two- decades, acid attacks on women in Bangladesh have been growing at an alarming rate (Anonymous, 2010).

Acid violence is also considered as a world-wide problem which showed its furiousness with the advent of time. Research indicates that attacks are being carried-out by many different nationalities and are not limited by race, religion, creed or location. Over the past 20 years, the evidence of the extent of violence perpetrated against women has increased and is beginning to offer a global overview of the magnitude of this abuse (Wahed and Bhuiya, 2007). This is a form of premeditated violence, usually against women, involving throwing corrosive acid at the face of the victim. The intent behind the attacks is to permanently scar and disfigure. Acid violence rarely causes death but always destroys lives, often young lives (ASTI Annual Review, 2008). Thus acid attacks leave victims horribly disfigured. Because most attacks are directed at the face in order to permanently scar the victim and destroy her physical appearance, often the victim is left blinded (Swanson, 2002). In Bangladesh acid attack, which emerged in this country couple of years later of the independence is a comparatively newer form of violence than various traditional crimes like murder, rape, theft etc. The cause of the noticeable frequencies of acid attacks lie with the availability of acid in all over the country. There seems to be a *prima facie* correlation between incidence of attack, and availability of acid (Kunthealand and Lewis, 2010). Therefore, in Bangladesh acid attacks have become relatively common as a form of domestic violence (Wikipedia, 2010).

The serious impacts of acid violence on the people especially women are not only on their physique but also on their mindset. The physical damages are possible to measure but the psychological harm or the post traumatic disorder which impacts on the victim's mind is immeasurable. Their physical inability induces them to become depressed and psychologically fragile. This has serious impact on their personal, familial and social life. Such violence is found to be happening in many countries due to domestic disputes. Family members commit this offense in the cases of family quarrels over nonpayment of dowry or disobedience, disrespect to husbands or in-laws in Bangladesh where others commit this offense due to various other reasons (Roushan and Mahmuda, 1997). Young unmarried girls are frequently found to be victimized of this hatred crime because of refusal of love, marriage or sex.

While initially such cases were reported sporadically, since the mid-1990s, because of improved media coverage, there has been a steady rise in the number of such violence reported in newspapers. It is a common misconception that acid attacks against women are peculiar to Bangladesh, and that attackers are Islamic fundamentalists who punish women for "immodest" behavior (Chowdhury, 2005). In reality the perpetrators consciously use violence as a mechanism for subordination. For, violence by intimate partners is often used to demonstrate and enforce a man's position as head of the

household or relationship. For other forms of violence, the subordination of women might not be the explicit motivation of the perpetrator, but is nevertheless a consequence of his actions (Watts and Zimmerman, 2002).

Materials and Methods

Secondary data analysis is the key method of the present study. Statistical data have been collected from Acid Survivors Foundation and various other secondary sources. Collected data have been analyzed carefully to understand the actual scenario of acid violence in Bangladesh against women and men as well. Data analysis was done by using frequency distribution, percentage analysis and trend analysis. The synthesized and processed data have been presented using frequency table, pie-chart, bar chart and pictorial trend pattern. Relevant available information in the form of books, articles and journals have been used generously in course of explaining various phenomena regarding acid violence.

Results and Discussions

Socio-Demographic Features of Victims

Age group of acid survivors

In case of male and female it is obvious that the victimization of females is much more frequent in Bangladesh than their male counterparts. In case of children, data from two years show that the female children are more vulnerable to acid attacks than the male children. Men and Women are mostly vulnerable to acid attacks till the age of 45. The numbers of total victimization of women in both the year of 2011 and 2012 are nearly double than that of men. Present data also show that the total frequency of overall victimization irrespective of sex decreased or remained unchanged for all age groups where the frequency increased slightly for the people or children having age less than 18 years (Table 1). This study reveals that the children are mostly victimized because of their staying with their superiors while they were victimized. There the children always are not the target beyond some exceptional cases. Moreover, the teenage girls sometimes for denying/refusing the proposal of love, marriage or sex could be victimized of such violent offense.

Table 1. Age group of acid survivors during 2011 and 2012

Age group	Men		Women		Total	
	2011	2012	2011	2012	2011	2012
Under 18 (Children)	12	09	14	23	26	32
19-25	08	04	15	19	23	23
26-35	08	06	26	12	34	18
36-45	07	06	09	11	16	17
46-55	03	01	06	02	09	03
Over 55	02	04	01	01	03	05
Total	40	30	71	68	123	98

(Data of 2011 was downloaded on 28 June, 2012 and data of 2012 was downloaded on 19 October, 2013 from the official website of Acid Survivors Foundation)

Acid attack statistics of 1999 to 2010 also shows that the females are more vulnerable to acid attacks than the males in case of most of the age groups (up to 45 years). So, the history of last fifteen years conveys us the same message that the females under 45 years are more likely to become victims of acid attacks (Fig. 1).

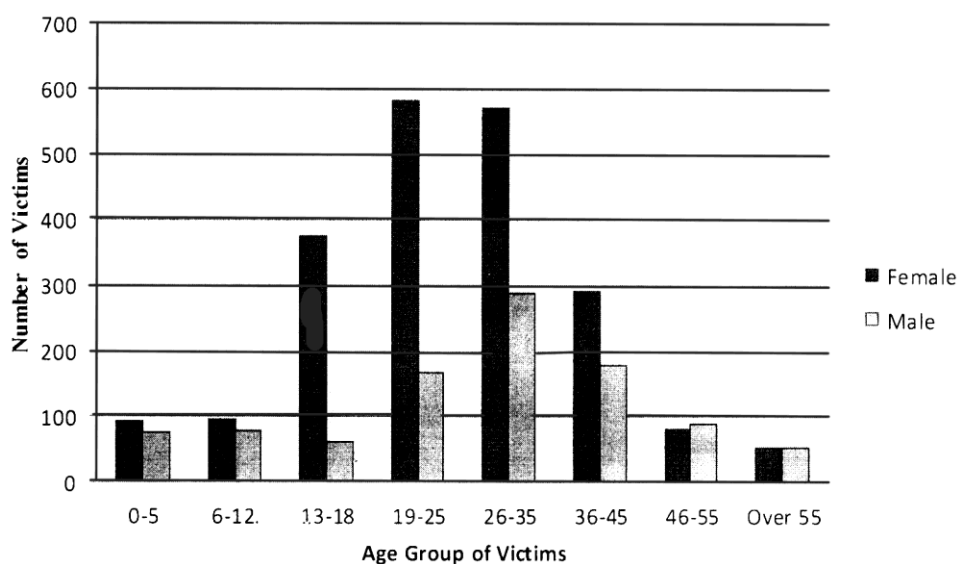


Fig. 1. Attack statistics-age group (1999-2010) (Source: Acid Survivors Foundation).

Victims of acid attacks (Gender perspective)

Acid attack statistics, if is analyzed, it is revealed that women and girls become victimized mostly than men and boys. Traditional patriarchal pattern of social system can act as a cause of their frequent victimization than the frequency of men and boys. The frequency of victimization of women and girls during the year of 2011 is about double than that of men and boys where it is more than double during the year of 2012. Documentation from Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) also reveals that young women are more commonly the targets of acid attacks (Baseline Report, n.d.). Present statistics also shows that the frequency of women victimization in contrast with the victimization of men has always remained more than double from the year of 1999 to 2010 and still this victimization is more frequent in case of young women (Table 2). The causes which provoke any person to be involved in such hatred crimes are in many cases associated with girls and women. In some cases where women are not directly associated with the conflicting issue in course of any civil dispute, they had to be the victims of revenge of their rival parties. So, the victimization of women due to acid attacks definitely does not indicate that they are the sole target of attackers. Rather it indicates that they are

vulnerable to many cases as are the men in frequency but they exclusively become part of the society's patriarchal view that they would be directed according to the will of the men. This particular view of male dominated society might have an impact on the frequency of women victimization which is almost double than that of men.

Table 2. Victims of acid attacks (gender perspective)

Years	Women and Girls	Men and Boys
2011	77	42
2012	68	30
1999-2010	2152 (69%)	993 (31%)

Source: Compiled from the official website and Annual Report 2010 of Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF)

Causes/ motivation behind acid violence

From the statistics of the year of 2011 and 2012 it is found that the land or the property related and money related issues are responsible in most of the cases for the incidents of acid attacks. 'Refusal or rejection of love, marriage or sex' is found to be the second premier reason for such attacks which most frequently happens against girls and women. Based on the frequency of incidents family related disputes and dowry are found as the next leading reasons for such violence caused by acid attacks. In case of 2012, the frequency of acid attacks due to land or property related issues decreased where attacks due to refusal of love, marriage or sex increased in a significant level (Table 3). Present cultural diffusion and impact of satellite television are making youngsters feeling like 'falling in love with cute girls' and thus they are seemingly becoming furious in case of rejection of such affairs. While any girl rejects their (boys') filmy style of approaching for love or marriage, they become violent and sometimes this motivates those boys to be involved in such hatred activities. Other than that when sexual desire of any person is not fulfilled by any girl or woman, he may expose violent activities like acid attacks with the intention to take revenge making her beauty distorted. Dowry and family related disputes along with this are good causes for such violence caused by acid attacks.

In case of analyzing the reasons of previous years (1999 to 2010) it is also found that Land/property related dispute and refusal/ rejection of marriage/sex are main causes of acid violence. However, other causes are more or less same like the years of 2011 and 2012 (Fig. 2). Dowry and family related disputes along with marital dispute are found as the most significant causes of such crimes if these are considered in a united way. The same findings was revealed in India where the refusal or rejection of love, marriage or sex along with denying dowry is considered as one of the most crucial causes of acid violence in India. A report submitted to the Supreme Court of India (Lakshmanan, 2008-2009) also states that –“Most of the reported acid attacks have been committed on women, particularly young women for spurning Suitors, for rejecting proposals of

marriage, for denying dowry etc. The attacker cannot bear the fact that he has been rejected and seeks to destroy the body of the woman who has dared to stand up to him". As this problem is not exclusive in Bangladesh and it has its similarity in the patterns and causes of victimization, legal issues and other measures of India and other countries could be analyzed in such situations to combat this offense successfully.

Table 3. Reasons for acid attack in 2011 and 2012

Reasons	Man		Woman		Children		Total	
	2011	2012	2011	2012	2011	2012	2011	2012
Dowry	-	-	5	8	1	-	6	8
Family related dispute	-	2	7	10	2	5	9	17
Land/property/money dispute	21	8	27	14	11	2	59	24
Marital dispute	2	-	6	5	1	1	9	6
Refusal/rejection of love/marriage/sex	2	3	6	5	8	14	16	22
Not know	-	1	-	1	2	1	2	3
Others	4	8	4	6	2	4	10	18
Total:	29	22	55	49	27	27	111	98

(Source: Statistical Data of Acid Survivors Foundation during 2011 and 2012)

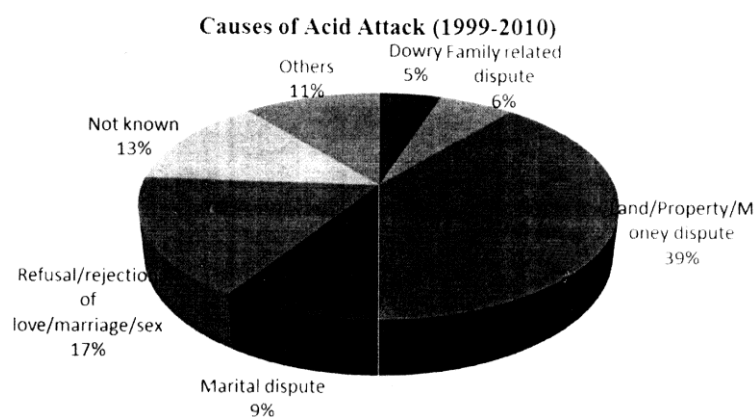


Fig. 2. Reasons for acid attack (1999-2010).

Acid violence at present and past

Trend analysis of acid attacks

If acid attack trend of last 14 years is analyzed it becomes patent that the total number of victims is more than the total number of acid attacks. It is because of the presence of more than one person in the spot during any single acid attack. It is often the case that attacks take place in the middle of the night, that a nearby family member is also victim to the attack, and that the victim does not get quick or adequate medical attention despite

his or her urgent need of it (Swanson, 2002). Chowdhury (2005) opined in the same way stating that the perpetrators often attack their victims at home in the middle of the night. Because family members tend to sleep together, they are also burnt in many cases. Children in most of the cases are victimized for such reasons. The trend analysis also shows that from 1999 to 2002 the frequency of such attacks increased gradually in an alarming rate. After the year of 2002, this frequency began to decrease slowly and after 10 more years this frequency is found as very low if is compared to the previous years (Fig. 3). Interventions taken by the government of Bangladesh with the continuous influence of various non-government victim support organizations including Acid Survivors Foundation set a strong foundation for establishing such an environment. In the meantime the government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh enacted the Acid Crime Control Act, 2002 and The Acid Control Act, 2002 which played important role in downsizing the frequency of acid violence in Bangladesh.

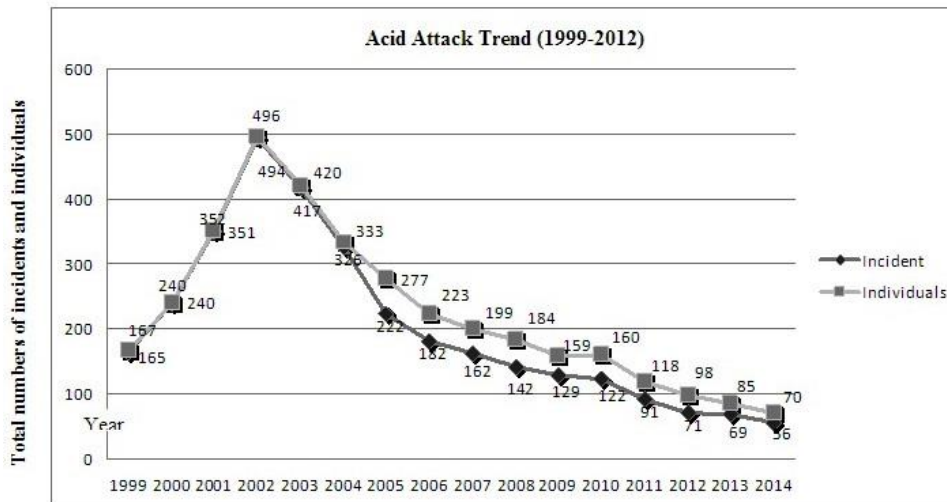


Fig. 3. Acid Attack Trend (1999-2014)

Acid attacks in 2013

Prior to the month of October, when this study took place, a considerable headway could be seen from the statistics. Here only in 50 incidents of acid attacks only 64 victims were reported which is seemingly less than the previous years. Though the correlation between different months and the frequency of offenses of a single year is not enough to draw the inference between various months and their relationship with the crime frequency, this comparison can yield important information regarding variations in the frequency of this crime in different months. This can help to generate hypothesis for the next possible research initiative. This statistics shows that the frequency of victimization due to acid attacks was more frequent during the month of July, August and September than other months of the year of 2013 (Table 4).

Table 4. Acid attack statistics in 2013

Month	Number of incidents	Number of survivors
January	6	8
February	5	5
March	2	2
April	6	9
May	4	7
June	3	5
July	8	8
August	7	8
September	9	12
Total	50	64

(Source: Acid Survivors Foundation)

Legal actions against offenders

Recent data of ASF provides information regarding the conviction status of offenders who were involved in acid violence. It is a matter of regret that among the 1939 cases (from 2002 to September, 2014) only 177 cases were resulted into conviction including 305 convicted persons. Among the convicted persons 13 were awarded death sentence, 116 were imprisoned for life and other 176 were imprisoned for different tenures (Fig. 4). Low conviction rate definitely indicates the carelessness of law-enforcing professionals in such a serious offense.

According to the proposal of ASF Police Headquarters maintains a Central Monitoring Cell from the year of 2006 to monitor the advancement of acid related cases and it shows a number of pending (under trial) cases from the year 2002 to 2010 (Table 5). This data also indicate that there are a number of cases that have been stayed by the order of court. Due to the case logs and other routine jobs, courts and police are not being able to pay serious heed to the acid attack incidents. Thus the conviction rate of these cases is not yet satisfactory.

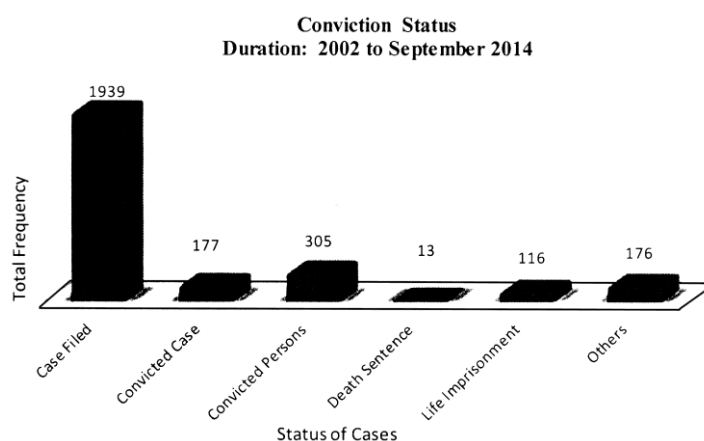


Fig. 4. Conviction status of the accused from 2002 to March, 2013 (Source: Acid Survivors Foundation).

Table 5. Statistics of acid crime control monitoring cell (up to 2010)

Year	No. of Case Filed	Charge Sheet	No. of Cases Under Investigation	Under Trial	Conviction		Type of conviction				Stay
					Case	Person	Death Sentence	Life Sentence	Others	Total	
2002	209	156	0	156	43	84	1	27	36	64	18
2003	258	158	0	158	33	54	2	25	26	53	30
2004	208	129	0	129	24	41	4	13	22	39	18
2005	206	122	0	122	24	37	3	10	33	46	34
2006	146	80	0	80	12	22	1	8	26	35	36
2007	177	109	0	109	11	17	0	6	11	17	67
2008	163	80	0	80	7	13	1	11	2	14	58
2009	129	70	0	70	13	13	1	2	10	13	15
2010	97	46	18	46	0	0	0	0	0	0	45
Total	1593	950	18	950	167	281	13	102	166	281	321

(Source: Acid Survivors Foundation)

Legal safeguards of and victim supports to survivors

Major acts associated with acid violence and acid use in Bangladesh

Before 2002 there was no special provision for preventing acid violence and controlling the handling of corrosive substances in Bangladesh. During the year of 2002 two acts have been enacted by the president as BNWLA submitted public interest litigation to the government against easy access of common masses to acid. On 17 March, 2002 two acts namely Acid Crime Control Act and Acid Control Act were approved by the then president of Bangladesh (Haque, et al., 2012). However, ASF articulates these acts as-

The Acid Crime Control Act of 2002 is intended to control acid crimes by mandating stringent punishment ranging from between three years and fifteen years and a hefty fine to life imprisonment to a maximum statement of death penalty. The variations of punishment depend on the parts of the body affected. For example punishment for killing of a person by acid or inuring a person resulting loss of vision, loss of hearing, or damages or disfigurement of the face, breasts or sexual organs can result in capital punishment or rigorous imprisonment for life and also a fine not exceeding one lakh taka. Damage or disfigurement of any member or joint of his/ her body will result in fourteen years of imprisonment but not less than seven years of rigorous imprisonment. Punishment for attempt to throw acid causing no damage or injury may extend to seven years but not less than three years of rigorous imprisonment and also with a fine not exceeding fifty thousand taka. Also, if someone assists to commit the crime of acid throwing, he/ she will receive the same punishment as the perpetrators. The Acid Control Act of 2002 has been introduced to control 'the import, production, transportation, hoarding, sale and use of acid, and to provide treatment to victims of acid violence, rehabilitate them, and provide legal assistance (Haque *et al.*, 2012).

The Acid Control Act stated the provisions for establishing the National Acid Control Council (NACC) and District Acid Control Committees (DACC). This act punishes the

people involved in the production, import, storage, sale and use of acid without license by a jail term of three to ten years where fine can be up to tk. 50000. According to this act the central government is the licensing authority for issuing import license and Deputy Commissioner is the licensing authority for transport, storage and seller and user license. All license holders are supposed to keep their records about the use of acid in course of their business or other purpose (The Acid Control Act of 2002).

Organizations Providing Legal and Social Assistance for Acid Victims in Bangladesh

A survivor of acid violence often requires medical attention during the crisis period. In addition, (s) he also often needs protection, safe accommodation, support, counseling and legal assistance (Akhter and Islam, 2013). There are various non-government agencies along with the government in Bangladesh which are working for providing the treatment and legal assistances to the acid survivors with psycho-social support for their rehabilitation. BRAC, Ain O Shalish Kendra, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA), Bangladesh Manabdhikar Bastobayan Sangstha (BSEHR), Bangladesh Legal Aid Services and Trust (BLAST) and some other NGOs are providing legal assistance to the victims. Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) is working solely with various aspects of acid violence and aiding the victims in all possible aspects including treatment. There are various other agencies along with ASF and BRAC which provides financial supports to acid victims like Department of Social Services of various districts, Department of Youth Development, the daily Prothom Alo Assistance Fund, Dutch Bangla Bank Limited and various local NGOs of Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Being a woman seems to be a great cause of acid violence in this society. In Bangladesh as well as in sub-continental region males are accustomed to see their female counterpart as obeying the orders of males. When they find that the women are trying to show the reflection of their own wish in their everyday activities, they become violent. It is astonishing that the males not only intend to see their female members of family to obey them but also intend to think their non-relative females in the same way. It is a matter of great regret that the females of this country still are not getting the agreed honor that they deserve in the 21st century. Proper distribution of parental property may decrease this rate. Consciousness regarding family related issues can be a solution of such hatred incidents. Empowerment of women and literacy can have tremendous impact to improve the situation. In the national context of Bangladesh, the rise in acid attacks needs to be understood not only in relation to existing gender inequality but also in relation to its complex and shifting socioeconomic, political, and cultural processes as they intersect with neoliberal development policies and globalization (Chowdhury, 2005). It is therefore important to make people aware against acid violence. Law enforcement agencies should keep careful vigilance over the issue. The organizations who work for the victims need to

monitor all aspects carefully and draw the attention of government if necessary. Civil society should be engaged in the awareness building initiatives against this violence. If necessary steps are taken to raise the people's awareness about the human dignity and to help the survivors, it might be possible to curb this problem successfully.

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