

Cross-country Analysis of Women's Participation in the Labor Force and Political Representation in Middle East Countries

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Abstract

This article offers an interdisciplinary review of women's constraints and opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) using a quantitative cross-country analysis, while it implements econometric models to measure the constraints on female participation in the labor force and parliament presentation. Though there is a vast amount of literature on women's rights at individual country level, the literature lacks a cross-country analysis in the MENA region, particularly a quantitative analysis. This paper fills the gap in literature by using a cross-country analysis of 12 countries in the MENA region to find out the drivers of women's participation in the labor force, and political representation. We test three hypotheses; first what are the factors that have shaped women's participation in the labor force and what is the role of corruption in participation. Second, what are the factors that contribute to female political representation in the parliaments. Third, we test the hypothesis whether women's participation in the labor force and political representation has improved Post- Arab Spring.

JEL Classification: I24, J16, K38, Z10

Keywords: Women's empowerment, Arab spring, gender equality, corruption, patriarchal culture, glass ceilings.

1. Introduction

Women have had limited access to economy and polity in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for decencies. Even in countries with more modern legislations and institutions, due to traditions, customs, and patriarchal culture have observed limited ability to participate in economic activities and political decision-making. The combination of patriarchal attitudes and legal structures have placed women in a highly disadvantageous position in the social order (Kazemi, 2000).

Even if women's rights have been achieved in secularized environments, from a historical point of view, there is no connection between secularization and the promotion of women's rights, nor between secularization and the promotion of equal rights. The Arab Spring helped enormously to aiding democratization (in Tunisia) and heightened many areas of inequalities that has created a global Islamic feminism, in geo-political spere.

Women in MENA are doing worse in terms of political, economic, socio-economic indicators than any other parts of the world, even compared to developing countries (Felder & Vuollo, 2008). Indeed, gender gaps in the region has been exacerbated post-Arab spring despite all efforts of civil societies and legal reforms. The gender gaps have increased in the past decade due to political instability, inter-state wars, domestic conflicts, and civil wars. Some states in the region have restricted access to education for women including Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan due to traditional roles that women should play at home. Those states experiencing conflict and high numbers of refugees, for example Lebanon and Syria have limited education possibility due to the economic climate, stereotypes, and beliefs against women empowerment.

The Middle East and Arab region have made the slowest progress across several indicators compared to the rest of the world. The female labor force participation in the MENA region is the lowest in the world and has remained so for several decades (Felder & Vuollo, 2008). This paradox has been explained by discriminatory gender norms, patriarchal culture, and lack of constitutional support, among other factors. The economic participation of women in Arab states is 33.3 percent compared to 55.6 percent in the world. In addition, women only own 17 percent of entrepreneur (Felder & Vuollo, 2008). This data reflects the depth and severity of women's disadvantage in labor force in Arab states. The poor performance in the MENA region can be attributed to high level of violence against women, discriminatory regulations, and lack of well-designed constitutions and legislations that endanger women's empowerment. But more importantly, one can refer to discriminatory traditions, customs, cultures, and taboos that have been conceptualized in brains of men and women for decades.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2. presents the literature review on women's empowerment and its development in different aspects including labor force participation and political representation across different countries in MENA region. Section 3. discusses theoretical framework. Section 4. elaborates indicators, data and methodology used in this study. Section 5. analyzes the estimated econometric results of the cross-country analysis with panel data. Section 6. concludes and provides policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review

One of the important gaps in the literature in the MENA region is lack of research on women's participation in labor force and polity. Research suggests that women in several Middle East countries remain disadvantaged in employment and the society, in general (Seyd & Ali, 2019). To fill the gap in the literature, we first briefly review the situation of women's social status and their participation in labor force and political representation across 12 sample countries including Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia. We selected these countries from the Greater Middle East, the Maghreb, Arab states and GCC.

j) Women's participation in labor force:

Importance of women to economic development has been highlighted in several studies (Pereira, 2020; Pereira & Bamel, 2021). Though women have advanced in management in Middle East, they have career and development constraints due to the strong gender inequality. More specifically, the number of women entrepreneurs in MENA region is lagging compared to men in many states (Bastin, Metcalfe & Zali, 2019). To address the issue of underrepresentation of women in the labor force, we briefly discuss the barriers women face in several MENA countries.

The gender gap in the labor participation rate is widest in Iraq and smallest in Kuwait and Qatar (EU parliament, 2014). Though in some countries such as Bahrain and Kuwait, families have started to rely more on women's financial support, still the gender gap overwhelmingly spreads throughout the countries in the region.

There is a huge gender gap in economic activities in Egypt, as women participation rate in the labor force does not exceed 20% (Hassan, 2015). Most employed women are in education and health care system. Women are presented in only 31.2% of management positions and there is a huge gap in women's wages with men in different sectors (Hassan, 2015). Lebanon is among the Arab countries that have allowed women to resume functions and responsibilities outside the traditional roles. Though women in Lebanon are increasingly recognized as full-fledged partners in the family economy, decision-making positions in Lebanon continue to be monopolized by men. According to the gender statistics released by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the number of women enterprise owners in Lebanon is significantly low, with women employers constituting only 1.5 percent of the female workforce (Jamali, Sidani & Safieddine, 2005).

The lack of opportunities for women in Jordan is manifested in low labor force participation of 15%, an unemployment rate of 23%, and a negligible entrepreneurship rate. (Ait Ali Silmane et al., 2020).

Despite all the reforms in Jordan, women still have small participation in workplace and only 19% of businesses are co-owned by women. In 2018, only 4% of working women were employer or business owner, compared to 13% for men (Ait Ali Silmane et al., 2020).

Though women constitute 59% of labor force in Kuwait, and occupy 64% of educational system (Meyer, Rizzo, & Ali, 2005), the diminishing level of support for women's rights in Kuwait has been the focus of several studies in Middle East. Indeed, women's trivial presence in economic and political activities is attributed to cultural, institutional, and structural factors. Based on the results of Arab barometer survey, only 12% of respondents agreed that men are better political leaders compared to 30% in Tunisia, and 20% in Lebanon (Thomas, 2019). Female participation rate in labor force is only 23.5% compared to 70.3% for men, which highlights a huge gender gap for that country (Avis, 2017). Female participation at workplace in Qatar is lower than anywhere else in the world (Al Attiyah & Naser, 2014). Based on a business approach developed by the World Bank, which measure 8 indicators with data that refers to the laws and regulations that are applicable to the business, Qatar stands 29 out of 100 (where 100 represents the highest possible score). The overall Qatar score is much lower than the average of MENA, 51.5 (World Bank, 2021). The most important barriers in Qatar include laws affecting women's pay, pregnancy and work conditions and gender differences in inheritance. However, Qatari women are beginning to attain higher level of education than men. Only 15% of Saudi Arabia is composed of female work force (Alharbi, 2015). Combination of the economic need for women's investment in the private sector and participation in the workforce, and the international political pressures for improving women's rights, as well as women's everyday

solidarity practices have led to some advancements in women's rights toward equality, but still, there is a long way ahead of the country (Alkhaled, 2021).

Tunisia started early in its reforms and with a better health and education system and succeeded to create a more productive labor force compared to other states in MENA. Despite all reforms, Tunisian women still face several economic and social barriers, related to patriarchal attitudes that prevents them from accessing positions in many economic and political areas. Women represented only 37% of employees in public service in 2016, and 46% of the total workforce. Unemployment rate after the Jasmine revolution has been rising substantially; while unemployment for men stands at 14-15%, unemployment for women is almost twice as men as high as 26-28% (Voorhoeve, 2015).

In sum, it is estimated that MENA region loses USD 575 billion due to current gender-based discrimination in the labor force (World Bank, 2018). Unfortunately, the norms, traditions, and patriarchal culture have contributed to misperception of women about their rights. For instance, over 80% of Jordanians believe that when jobs are scarce, men should have higher rights, and over 70% believe that men make better business decisions than women. (Ait Ali Silmane, 2020).

(ii) Women's rights in political representation:

Women are underrepresented in decision making across the MENA region. For instance, in Egypt, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) appointed an all-male committee to draft constitutional principles for Referendum in March 2011. In addition, no women were appointed in the post 2011 cabinet and no women has ever become a governor (Hassan, 2015).

Iraq witnessed radical changes to its political system post 2003. These changes occurred after many wars, sanctions, and external occupation until it became one of the failed states. Despite introducing new articles in Transitional Administration Law (TAL) in 2004 to protect women and minorities, women have been absent from the front line of the political life. When national assembly was formed in 2004 only 20% of members were women. The share of women in Parliament between 2006 and 2021 has been above 25%. However, these numbers do not represent the real participation and voice of women in leadership and process of building state during the transition (Alwan, Qati, & Ali, 2021).

The amendment of the election law in 2005 opened the doors for women in Kuwait to vote and run for office and participate in parliamentary elections. In 2009 women succeeded to gain 8% of the seats in the election of the parliament. However, the rate decreased to 6% in 2012. And the Parliament did not have a single female candidate in 2013 (Shalaby, 2015). Since 2010 Lebanon has observed a consistent decline in its relative gender gap score, particularly in political empowerment. Only 3.1% of parliamentary seats are held by women in Lebanon (Avis, 2017).

Tunisia has been known for its modern legislations on women's rights. Tunisian females represent 60% of university students in different levels, but are underrepresented in decision-making and political positions (Ouanada, 2020). Gender based discrimination still exists in Tunisia, creating a glass ceiling that has limited women's access to high management and political positions.

Though there have been some reforms in advancing women's role in leadership and political roles in the region, there are still institutional and cultural barriers embedded in decision making and political participation in several MENA countries.

3. Theoretical Framework

As elaborately pointed out by several scholars including: Danon & Collins (2021); Seyed & Metcalfe (2017); Zulfiqar (2019), and Pereira et al. (2020) women in MENA have been faced with the key following challenges:

- 1- Women do not participate in the labor force to the same degree of women in other parts of the world even in developing countries (Danon & Collins 2021).
- 2- Women are poorly presented in legislative bodies, such as parliaments, compared to global averages (Avis 2017; Danon & Collins 2021).
- 3- It is perceived that women's participation in the labor force and political representation have deteriorated in several MENA countries since Jasmine revolution.

This study uses a quantitative approach covering 12 countries in the region to test three hypotheses:

(i) does education matters to participation in the labor force and political presentation (ii) Does corruption index matter for female participation in the labor force and political presentation (iii) has Arab spring contributed or deteriorated the degree of women's participation in the labor force and representation in the political system.

4. Data and Methodology

4.1. Data

We use the data from the world development indicators of the World Bank website and from Congressional Budget Office to compare the situation of women among MENA countries. Table-1 indicates the highest female labor force participation is found in Qatar and Kuwait, while Iraq and Pakistan have had the lowest participation rate due to severe constraints on women's career development. We also use an index which reflects the misperception of women about their rights, women who believe men are justified in beating their wife. This index is highest for Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan compared to other countries, outlining the dramatic patriarch culture, male dominance, and lack of judicial protection for women, which has been exacerbated in post conflict states.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of women participation indicators in the Middle East (2021)

Country	Literacy rate among women (%)*	Labor force participation female (%)	Women married at age of 15 relative to 15-24 years old females	Women who believe men are justified in beating wife
Afghanistan	-	21.36	4.2%	80.2
Algeria	75.3	-	-	-
Egypt	65.5	18.49	2%	35.7
Iraq	79.9	11.41	7.2	51.2
Jordan	97.8	-	-	-
Kuwait	94.9	50.19	-	-
Lebanon	93.3	22.9	1.4%	9.7
Morocco	64.6	-	-	-
Pakistan	65.18	21.65	3.6%	41.1
Qatar	94.7	56.92	0%	6.6
Saudi Arabia	92.7	21.95	-	-
Tunisia	72.2	25.12	0%	30.3

Source: * Women in Middle East and North Africa: Issues for Congress, retrieved from <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R46423.pdf>
World Bank, World Development Indicators.

Table 2. on gender index and seats held by women in parliament indicates that Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have had the lowest share of women's participation in the parliament; however, Egypt, Iraq, and Tunisia have had the highest shares, mainly due to legislative reforms and more democratic societies run by relatively liberal regulations compared to other states.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of gender inequality in Middle East Countries (2019)

Country	Social Institution and Gender Index (1)	Constitutional provisions (2)	Share of seats held by women in parliaments (2)	Absence of Legal discrimination score (lower=more discrimination) (3)
Afghanistan	52.8%	NO	2.3%	38.1
Algeria	-	-	7.5%	-
Egypt	-	Yes	22.9%	45
Iraq	53.7%	Yes	26.4%	45
Jordan	57.3%	-	11.8%	-
Kuwait	-	No	1.5%	29
Lebanon	56.2%	No	4.7%	53
Morocco	50.8%	-	20.2%	-
Pakistan	58.7%	No	4.5%	55.6
Qatar	-	Yes	9.8%	29
Saudi Arabia	-	No	19.9%	80
Tunisia	47.6	Yes	26.3%	68

1. Source: UNICEF.org retrieved from https://data.unicef.org/resources/data_explorer/unicef_f/?ag=UNICEF&df=GENDER&ver=1.0&dq=GN_IDX...&startPeriod=2009&endPeriod=2019
2. Women in Middle East and North Africa: Issues for Congress, retrieved from <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R46423.pdf>
3. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security, (GIWPS) retrieved from: <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/WPS-Index-2021-Summary.pdf>

To find out the relationship between women's participation in labor force with independent variables, we use panel data for the period of 2005-2023. The data on women's labor force participation, tertiary education, GDP growth, Budget Deficit, Per-capita loan and financial development and share of seats held by women in parliaments are retrieved from the World Bank Indicators of the World Bank website, and data on corruption index is retrieved from International Transparency.

4.2. Methodology

We investigate the factors that contribute to low participation in labor force and underrepresentation in parliaments. The effects of advanced education on labor force participation have been emphasized by several scholars including (Dandan & Pereria Marques, 2017; Barsoum, 2018; Aziz Khan, 2019). Moreover, the correlation between women at work and corruption has been the focus of several studies including Dollar, Fisman, & Gatti (2001) who find the greater representation of women in parliament, the lower the level of corruption. Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC) investigate the effects of gender equality on corruption and find that an increase in the number of females in the Parliament tend to reduce official corruption. Samimi et al. (2013) use panel data for the period 2003-2010 for 27 selected Islamic states and find that with an increase in the rate of women's participation in labor force corruption has decreased dramatically.

Corruption is generally seen as a harmful element that contributes to business ethics glass ceiling. The glass ceiling develops because in reacting to corruption, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and small family firms remain opaque and unable to access financing outside the family network or traditional bank loans.

Our study is different from the previous studies, and it follows Bishara (2011) in the sense that causality runs from corruption to gender inequality because the corrupted governments leave fewer resources for private sector, through crowding out effect. As such, less space is left for women to participate in the labor market. We test the hypothesis that corruption has affected women's participation in labor force and representation in parliaments.

We also use a dummy variable for Arab spring post 2011 to find out whether there has been any improvement in women's right for access to labor market and seats held in the parliaments post-Arab spring.

We estimate equations 1. and 2. with panel data for the period of 2005-2023 for the 12 above-mentioned countries.

$$FLP = a_0 + a_1 \sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^k Edu + a_2 \sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^k Corrup + a_3 \sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^k X_{ij} \quad \text{Equation 1.}$$

$$PPR = b_0 + b_1 \sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^k Edu + b_2 \sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^k Corrup + b_3 \sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^k X_{ij} \quad \text{Equation 2.}$$

List of Variables

FLP represents female participation in labor force, *PPR* represents political presentation measured by seats held by women in the parliament, *Edu* refers to tertiary education at university level, *Corrup* is index of corruption measured by Corruption Index of Transparency International, and matrix *X* represents control variables or fixed effects across different countries, including GDP growth (GDPG), Budget deficit (BD), access to bank loans measured by per-capita loan (PCL), and level of financial development (FD) measured by private sector credit to GDP. We use two dummy variables; the first dummy (D1) equals 1 for the post Jasmine revolution (Arab spring in 2011) and the second dummy (D2) relates to the post war states. Finally, *i* represent the year and *k* represents the country.

5. Estimated Results

5.1. Estimated Results for Women Participation in the Labor Force



Table 3. indicates that all independent variables together can explain more than 85% of changes in women participation in the labor force. The coefficient on education is statistically significant at 5% and represents the elasticity of women’s participation in labor force to tertiary education (since model is in logarithm form). This elasticity is estimated around 0.34 and indicates that one percent increase in the number of people in tertiary education increases the possibility of female participation in the labor force by 0.34 percent. Expectedly, the coefficient on corruption is negative and statistically significant, and indicates that one percent increase in the index of corruption reduces the possibility of women participation in the labor force by 0.12 percent. In other words, consistent with theory and indicated by some scholars including (Bishara, 2011) in a more corrupted society there is less chance for women to participate in the labor force. This result highlights the importance of reforms against corruption in the Middle East for women’s participation in the labor market.

The coefficient on the dummy variable for Jasmine revolution (D1) is negative and statistically significant, indicating that the Arab Spring has exacerbated women’s participation in the labor force. As emphasized by some scholars including Chamlou & Karshenas (2016); and (Battaloglu & Fassin, 2017), the post Arab Spring states are more conservative and have had serious threats that undermines the gains women had achieved over the past 20-30 years on economic and social fronts. Finally, the coefficient for the second dummy variable (D2) is negative and statistically significant, highlighting that post war states have had lower participation of women in the labor force. Interestingly, the coefficients on GDP growth, private credit, and financial development as control variables are not statistically significant, indicating that women’s participation in the labor force in MENA has not been shaped by business cycles and macroeconomic fundamentals, as there are several barriers to their career development, which emanate from legislations, customs, and patriarchal culture rather than macroeconomic environment.

Table 3. Women’s education and corruption effects on women’s labor force participation

Variable	Coefficient
Education	0.34 (0.02)
Corruption	-0.12 (0.03)
BD	0.14 (0.05)
D1	-0.17 (0.04)
D2	-0.13 (0.03)
GDPG	0.05 (0.04)
PCL	0.04 (0.07)
FD	0.12 (0.13)
R-squared	0.85
Adjusted R-squared	0.82
F-statistics	26.35
Durbin Watson	1.89

Source: Authors’ estimation; numbers in parenthesis are standard deviations.

5.2. Estimated Results for Women Representation in Parliamentary Seats

The relationship between corruption and political presentation has been the focus of several scholars including Bishara (2011); Moghadam, (2015); Dandan & Periera Marques, (2017). In addition, education, and knowledge sharing promote human capital as emphasized by several scholars including Budhwar, et al. (2019); Preiera (2020); Budhwar et al. (2020); Bamel, Pereira, & Cappiello (2021); Pereira & Bamel (2021); Pereira & Mohiya (2021); Bamel, Pereira, Giudice, & Temouri (2022). Given the importance of education and corruption in affecting political representation we use these two variables besides the dummy variables as independent variables in the regression models.

Furthermore, we control macroeconomic conditions and business cycles by implementing control variables such as GDP growth, private sector credit, and degree of financial development. The estimated results indicate that all independent variables together explain more than 87% of changes in women's participation in the parliaments. The elasticity of women's seats held in the parliaments to education is estimated 0.12, which indicates one percent increase in the number of females in tertiary education will increase women's participation in the parliament by 0.12 percent. Expectedly, the coefficient on the corruption is negative and statistically significant and equal to 0.17, which indicates one percent increase in the corruption index reduces the number of seats held by women in the Parliament by 0.17. The result is alarming and highlights the importance of anti-corruption reforms in the region for the empowerment of women and their participation in the parliament and political decision-making.

Again, the coefficient on the dummy variable for the Arab spring is negative and statistically significant, indicating that Arab Spring has adversely impacted women's participation in political representation and decision making. Indeed, though a few countries have been able to carry out reforms to improve women participation post Arab Spring, the net effect for majority of countries has been negative. Our result is consistent with the finding of Sinha (2012), and Battaloglu & Fassin (2017) who find Arab-Spring has deteriorated women's situation and participation in political activities. Finally, the dummy variable on the war states (D2) is negative and statistically significant, indicating that women in the post war states such as Afghanistan, Algeria, and Iraq have experienced lower participation in the parliament. And the coefficient on the dummy for war states is almost twice as the coefficient on Jasmine revolution. Indeed, the war states have experienced a worse situation for participation of women in the parliament and decision-making.

In addition, the post-Arab Spring political events indicate pressures on Middle East countries to democratize has been replaced by security cooperation and anti-terrorism measures as the top priority (Battaloglu & Fassin, 2017). This replacement has had severe negative consequences for women's participation in economic and political activities, undermining women's empowerment and promoting radicalism.

Finally, the coefficients on GDP growth, private sector credit and financial development are not statistically significant, indicating that women's participation in the parliaments have not been shaped by orthodox macroeconomic fundamentals. On the contrary, women participation in the parliament has been impacted by the level of corruption, jasmine revolution and post-war states.

Table 4. Women's education and corruption effects on female representation Parliament in MENA

Variable	Coefficient
Education	0.12 (0.03)
Corruption	-0.17 (0.05)
D1	-0.03 (0.01)
D2	-0.07 (0.03)
GDPG	0.04 (0.07)
PCL	0.01 (0.05)
FD	0.02 (0.03)
R-squared	0.87
Adjusted R-squared	0.84
F-statistics	57.61
Durbin Watson	1.94

Source: Authors' estimation; numbers in parenthesis are standard errors.

6. Concluding Remarks

The whole MENA region faces severe challenges and lags economic and political participation compared to the rest of world even in developing countries. However, there are huge differences among the countries in the region. Though some countries have been able to carry out major

legislative reforms, others have been left behind and there is a huge gap among these countries regarding women's participation in the labor force and political presentations. We contributed to the literature by using quantitative cross-country analysis and implementing econometric models with panel data to test the hypothesis of whether education and corruption has affected women's participation in the labor force and polity. We found that corruption plays a detrimental role in women's participation both in labor force and political representation. Therefore, anti-corruption reforms should be at the forefront in the region, not only by domestic governments, but also by the international donors and governments who provide foreign aid to the MENA region. Conditionality of foreign aids to anti-corruption measures is an instrument that can help women in the MENA region to achieve greater gender equality and empowerment.

We also used a dummy variable for Post-Arab Spring to find out whether women's participation in economic and political representation has deteriorated post Arab spring. Expectedly, and in accordance with several scholars we found that Jasmine revolution has had a negative impact on women participation in the labor force and polity. In addition, we found that, while macroeconomic fundamentals do not matter for women's participation, being in a post war state has limited participating in labor force and polity.

Challenges for improving the conditions of women in the Middle East include changing legislations with emphasis on women's rights, access to free education, constitutional reforms, and more importantly, fighting against corruption as a widespread phenomenon in the region. The old patriarchal culture, male supremacy, female misperception of their image, and internalizing external barriers are among the main impediments that hold back societies from moving toward a more democratic state with equal gender rights. Thus, there is a fundamental need for cultural reforms that fights against corruption, patriarchal culture, taboos, and traditions; without such reforms, moving toward a more democratic society, which respects the empowerment of women with equal gender rights under current dynamic interconnected barriers from culture, regulations, and governments seems inaccessible, if not impossible.

Avenues for Further Research

One of the areas that this research study can be developed in the future is to expand the sample to include more countries particularly north African countries that suffer from civil wars, domestic conflicts, and enormous level of government corruption. Another area for improvement is to use more control variables to capture macroeconomic differences among countries. For instance, interest rate, trade openness, and financial integration into global economy can crystallize the cross-countries fundamental differences more significantly. Another issue that can be addressed in the future is using different econometric techniques such as Two Stage Least Squared (2SLS) and Vector Auto Regression (VAR) model to control for missing variables and misspecification.

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