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Women's Social Rights: Untapped Economic Potential

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Women's Social Rights: Untapped Economic Potential

Abstract

This paper analyzes whether women's social rights play a role in fostering higher levels of economic development. Prior development initiatives and economic policies failed to account for the productive capacities of women by discriminating against their basic rights to things such as an equitable education, equal inheritance, and marital rights. Applying the CIRI (Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights) dataset for women's social rights, I found that improvements in these areas of human rights leads to significant increases in real GDP per capita, which highlights the need for development analysts and economists to focus their attention on countries' most viable productive resource, women.

Keywords

Women's Social Rights and Development

Disciplines

Economics | Income Distribution | Inequality and Stratification | Political Science | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration | Social Policy | Women's Studies

Comments

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Women's Social Rights: Untapped Economic Potential

Political Science 303: Gender and Development

Monae Evans

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This paper analyzes whether women's social rights play a role in fostering higher levels of economic development. Prior development initiatives and economic policies failed to account for the productive capacities of women by discriminating against their basic rights to things such as an equitable education, equal inheritance, and marital rights. Applying the CIRI (Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights) dataset for women's social rights, I found that improvements in these areas of human rights leads to significant increases in real GDP per capita, which highlights the need for development analysts and economists to focus their attention on countries' most viable productive resource, women.

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April 14, 2015

Cross-nationally, women continue to lag far behind men in terms of their social status and access to basic human rights. Although this is true for most women, those living in developing countries are disproportionately impacted by social inequities. The combination of challenges such as poverty, a lack of healthcare access, and the inability to attain an education not only prevent these women from advancing in society, but also perpetuate their oppression. Interestingly, these issues have been gaining a growing level of attention due to greater awareness around incidents like female genital mutilation, domestic abuse, rape, and infant and maternal mortality. These atrocities have tremendously impacted women worldwide, raising concerns about the importance of women's rights. As a result, the 1993 United Nations Conference on Women's Rights classified women's rights as human rights which highlighted the need to prioritize women's empowerment and realize their inherent rights as human beings. Placing the specific experiences of women into the realm of human rights has encouraged transnational activism on the subject of gendered human rights issues. This increase in international attention has led to a growing number of feminist scholars and women's rights activists who believe that women's empowerment is essential to the process of development.

Although this initiative for activism on women's rights has been instituted, women still face great gender disparities in terms of a lack of their inherent human rights. In most countries, women enroll in school in lower numbers than men, tend to die earlier than men, are unable to inherit or own property, and earn lower wages than men. Embedded gender ideologies and conceptions of male and female societal roles prevent countries from truly valuing the work of women in and outside of the home. This raises an interesting question: why do societies bypass

the productive capacities of women? In this study I will examine the extent to which the provision of women's social rights translates into improvements in a country's economic development. As suggested above, women's rights need to be considered as human rights in order for countries to truly begin valuing these individuals as people and tapping into their productive capacity to function equally in society. This issue is not only specific to women, but has broader impacts on society as whole. Until women's rights are regarded equally to human rights, we will not be able to live in a truly developed world. To provide greater context for this topic, I will provide a brief review of the relevant literature and discuss the theories that underlie my analysis.

Relevant Literature

Often, development is defined in terms of economic growth, a condition whereby countries are able to improve their standard of living and develop more sustainable institutions by accelerating their economies and improving individual incomes. There are, however, various ways to measure and conceptualize development. Sen defines development as freedom that "expands the real freedoms that people enjoy" (Sen 1999, 3). He argues that advancements in human freedoms are catapulted by improvements in social, political, and economic arrangements that provide individuals with a greater range of rights and choices (1999). This broader understanding of development greatly contributes to my analysis in that this process facilitates the expansion of freedoms for all peoples. Therefore, the exclusion of women from these freedoms inherently impedes development by barring particular individuals from their human rights.

As illustrated above, the classification of women's rights as human rights has led a growing number of scholars to focus on feminism and development. Much of the literature

shows that women have a significant role to play in influencing development and economic growth within a country. In regards to this, Sarah Mosedale states that “one of the underlying causes of poverty is the subordination of women” (2014, 1116). However, there continue to be differing perspectives on the causal relationship between women and development. As Esther Duflo suggests, “there is a bidirectional relationship between economic development and women’s empowerment,” whereas, “in one direction development alone can play a major role in driving down inequality between men and women; in the other direction, continuing discrimination against women can, as Sen has forcefully argued, hinder development” (Duflo 2012, 1053). In regards to this, Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, describes how “gender equality is a prerequisite to achieving the other Millennium Development Goals” (United Nations 2008). Additionally, Duflo describes how the World Bank has shifted its focus to gender equality, in which institutional sexism needs to be overridden in order to “accelerate development” (Duflo 2012, 1053). On the other hand, Duflo stresses the importance of economic development in engendering greater rights for women. She argues that economic development will reduce poverty, which will relax the constraints on individual households and reduce the burden on women (2012).

Others have taken an alternate angle on the issue, examining the role of socio-cultural factors. In regards to this, Victor Hiller suggests that economic growth has the potential to exacerbate inequitable gender relations, unless “it is accompanied by some cultural and social changes” (Hiller 2014). As illustrated by the U-shaped depiction of economic development and women’s female labor force participation rate, traditional gender orientations may be significant indicators for the increase in gender inequality in the labor force during the initial stages of development (2014). Hiller argues that these social norms may be so binding that it places

countries in a “gender inequality trap,” “that might prevent the economy from attaining a high output level” (2014, 456). Therefore, development and women’s rights may reinforce one another, which is important to account for as I proceed throughout this analysis.

Some scholars have examined the direct impact that women’s lack of social rights has on development. A recent case study on Saudi Arabian women found that women are impeded from participating in economic activities due to their lack of education and formal skill training (Alkhteb 2014). Many countries, like Saudi Arabia, struggle to provide women with equal educational opportunities and, as a result, women are less qualified than men for positions. However, it has also been argued that even when women are equally skilled and qualified for jobs, they face even greater discrimination as they are typically placed in female-dominated industries and jobs of lower pay (Jayaweera 1997). In addition, there are several other factors associated with women’s social rights such as their unfavorable work conditions and the nature of their work that prevent them from contributing to a country’s economic growth (Alkhteb 2014). A report by the Rural Development Institute discusses how a woman’s right to equal inheritance of land and property has a direct impact on a country’s economic growth. The report states that land rights for women not only “provide families with a source of food and income generating opportunities,” but also “create a sense of self-worth and give people options” (Scalise 2009). Therefore, women’s social rights, in terms of equal inheritance, can directly generate greater incomes for women while also shifting socio-cultural norms. In response to this, some research suggests that “legal reform to improve women’s inheritance rights could potentially provide a low-cost way to reduce gender discrimination and improve a range of socio-economic outcomes for women” (Deininger et al 2010, 1). However, this undertaking can be quite complex considering the gap between legally recognized inheritance rights for women

and socially recognized inheritance rights (Scalise 2009). In relation to this, some scholars discuss the indirect relationship between marriage rights and economic development, as marriage usually dictates women's inheritance and property ownership. Although women may have formal land rights, marriage customs such as "polygamy, marital property rules, and bride price or dowry" play a larger role in governing the transfer of property (2009, 7). From these arguments, it is clear that there may exist a chasm between women's de facto and de jure rights, in that women may have legal rights on paper that are not socially recognized due to culturally distinct marriage practices, inheritance rights, and social norms regarding their education.

It has also been found that economic growth is influenced by other processes such as globalization. In regards to this, scholars have found that "economic globalization in terms of trade and capital accounts, is a powerful weapon that can elevate the quality of institutions," which in turn promotes economic development (Law et al 2014, 210). Law et al suggest that improving institutions will enhance the legal framework, ensuring the delivery and provision of fundamental rights to things such as land and property (2014). Therefore, economic globalization may be essential to the expansion of women's rights, which will in turn generate greater economic growth for countries. On the other hand, Law et al specified that economic globalization in terms of trade openness can be detrimental to economic growth, particularly in the short run (2014). Developing nations may lack the institutional capacity to protect their infant industries and capital accounts when opening up to global trade, which harms their development.

Some have pointed to the impacts that economic globalization has on women's rights, arguing that these processes can have detrimental effects. Economic globalization can harm women's rights, as their labor is typically exploited in export industries that are rapidly integrating into the global market. According to this, corporate globalization "may have a

particularly pernicious effect on the economic, social, and political life of women as profit-hungry corporations break down communitarian values and interests and breed hardships for the weak, particularly women” (Neumayer and De Soysa 2010, 1065). There are others, however, who argue that the profit-seeking corporations that are proliferating in a globalizing world do not have room to discriminate and must hire the most productive workers regardless of traditional social norms (2010). Bhagwati suggests that this will produce greater rights for women, which will inadvertently spill over to other countries that will be forced to relinquish discriminatory practices to become more competitive in the global market (Bhagwati 2004). Economic globalization could also generate greater political pressure from international institutions and transnational advocacy groups that favor more democratic practices and the expansion of human rights (Neumayer and De Soysa 2010). Therefore, economic globalization can influence changes in a country’s economic growth and also alter women’s rights.

In addition, cultural diversity has been found to be an important indicator of a nation’s level of development. Kolo argues that countries with higher levels of diversity, particularly ethnic and linguistic fractionalization, are typically “associated with poorer institutions and governance” (2012, 5). He found that ethnic diversity is linked to higher levels of corruption within state institutions which weakens them and erodes their ability to provide public goods (2012). Thus, corrupt institutions not only prevent the state from establishing sustainable economic opportunities, but they also encourage crime and violence which facilitates conflict and impedes development. In addition, some argue that this leads to civil wars that perpetuate poverty and further polarize ethnic groups, making economic growth nearly impossible (Goren 2014). This could greatly impact the rights that women have, particularly for those within marginalized ethnic groups. Therefore, the analysis of women’s rights also require an

intersectional examination of rights for women across diverse ethnic groups as some women may have greater access to rights than others. In regards to this, Liesbeth van der Hootge and Koos Kingma found that numerous development agencies fail to account for cultural diversity within many Latin American nations. They argue that “a project focusing on promoting the rights of indigenous people will not necessarily focus on inequality between women and men in the indigenous community” (2004, 47). From this, it is clear that cultural diversity could possibly stunt economic growth as there is heightened conflict among ethnic groups which also distorts the rights available to women in marginalized ethnic groups.

In regards to the political dimensions of a nation’s capacity to promote development, it has been argued that regime type plays a role in fostering greater economic growth. Michael Miller finds that there is a bidirectional relationship between democracy and development (2012). According to his analysis, democratic regimes not only encourage economic growth, but they are also stabilized by it. That is because democracies establish socio-economic rights that the state promises to individuals in order to create governmental trust and legitimacy (Jaron, 2012). As a result of this trust, individuals have greater incentive to carry out investments, economic ventures, and contribute to the society’s economy (2012). It has also been found that “extra constitutional government changes are relatively rare in democracies, implying that political systems are more stable and predictable, and thereby are more hospitable to business and investments” (Wu 2012, 367). However, strongly authoritarian regimes have also accelerated the economies of other countries as well. Wu argues that many authoritarian rulers seek to secure their monopoly over political power by increasing fiscal revenues by enacting market-friendly policies that enhance economic development (2012, 388). Therefore, strongly democratic and authoritarian countries may experience greater economic growth than regimes that fall somewhere in the middle. It has

also been argued that democratic regimes afford citizens greater rights, which directly impacts the provision of social rights to women. According to this, Walsh found that democracies have a heightened level of consideration for public concerns and therefore are influenced by the voices and demands of women's rights leaders and activists which have a direct impact on women's empowerment (Walsh 2010). Common amongst scholars is the idea that authoritarian regimes are unfavorable to women's rights as dictators are more likely to ignore public concerns and repress them. In opposition to this, Grabe and Dutt argue that authoritarian regimes can influence the emergence of revolutionary groups and movements (2015). Therefore, strongly democratic and authoritarian regimes may have direct influences on a country's economic growth, but they might also indirectly impact the rights that women can attain.

The various arguments and literature available on the topic shows that gendered rights exercise an important influence on development. Women's rights may directly impact their access to educational, employment, and land inheritance opportunities. Women's rights may also indirectly affect development as other processes and state characteristics play a role in this relationship. In order to account for these various relationships, I will analyze the interplay of a nation's economic globalization, cultural diversity, and regime type in influencing the effect of women's rights on economic development. Due to the multidimensionality of this analysis, it will greatly complement past studies on this topic and provide a more accurate account of women's access to social rights and the various ways in which these processes influence development. Based on this information, my central hypothesis is: the higher the level of social rights women have, the higher the nation's level of economic development will be.

Theory/Methodology

In order to test the relationship between women's rights and development, I employ data from the Quality of Government Institute (QOG) that includes measures for women's social rights and economic development. Prior research suggests that women's rights are human rights, and should be analyzed as such. Therefore, my analysis will apply the Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights (CIRI) dataset from the QOG Institute to test the impacts of my main explanatory variable, women's social rights, on economic development. This measure quantifies information regarding government respect for 15 internationally recognized human rights for 202 countries annually from 1981-2011. I focus on the CIRI measure for women's social rights (*ciri_wosoc*), which measures women's access to various rights such as equal inheritance, the right to enter into marriage on a basis of equality with men, property inheritance rights, and the right to an education (QOG 2014). This variable is measured on a scale of 0 to 3, to indicate where countries fall in terms of their provision and enforcement of women's social rights. A score of 0 indicates that women have no social rights in law. A score of 1 indicates that women have some legal social rights that are not enforced by the government, while a 2 provides that women have some social rights in law that are effectively enforced. Finally, a score of 3 indicates that all of women's social rights are guaranteed and equally enforced by the government (QOG 2014). Women's rights are not only essential to women's individual empowerment, but they also translate into greater economic growth for countries. Furthermore, social rights underlie other important economic and political rights that women may have. The absence of social rights preemptively negates the presence of other rights, such as the right to credit when women lack the authority over household resources. As a response, this analysis will account for women's social rights as they could impact women's other capabilities.

My dependent variable will gauge economic development, which is also measured using data from the QOG dataset. As discussed earlier, development is defined in a variety of ways by scholars and development analysts. Prior theories linked development with freedom, which I have defined in terms of greater rights for women. Therefore, these two concepts are equally reinforcing. However, I want to focus specifically on the impact that women's rights has on a nation's growth in economic terms. This will allow me to determine how women's rights influence countries' economic productivity using quantifiable data. To measure economic development, I will examine the impacts on real GDP per capita which is calculated annually in constant US Dollar prices for 169 countries for the years 1950-2011. This measure was computed using the information from the Penn World Table dataset (coded `pwt_rgdpc`). Real GDP per capita is an important measure used as a world development indicator. It determines the economic welfare of a population based on levels of productivity and output in a country. Although real GDP per capita does not directly measure sustainable development, it can provide great insight into a country's level of productivity, which is important as we analyze the impacts that women's rights has on the growth of economies. To determine the relationship between women's rights and economic development, I will run a regression test for women's social rights (`ciri_wosoc`) and real GDP per capita (`pwt_rgdpc`) for the years 1981-2011 using stata, a tool for statistical analysis.

In addition, it is important that I control for economic globalization, cultural diversity, and regime type, as they have been found to influence the relationship between women's rights and economic development. As suggested by previous scholars, economic globalization may have direct and indirect effects on economic growth as new industries, markets and economic ideals disseminate and are integrated throughout the international economy. Economic

integration can also impact a country's level of economic development as new trading partners and investment ventures are pursued. To account for this, I incorporated a measure for economic globalization from the QOG Institute, (coded as `dr_eg`). This variable measures the actual flows of goods, services and capital by examining openness to trade and investment for 153 countries annually for the years 1970 to 2010. For this control variable, I hypothesize that the more economically globalized a country is, the higher its real GDP per capita will be.

Cultural Diversity is also important to control for as it has been found to influence the propensity for conflict and corruption within a country. It also stratifies social groups, as marginalized women face differing outcomes in terms of access to their rights. To analyze this, I will apply the measure for cultural diversity from the QOG Institute, (coded as `fe_cultdiv`) which measures the structural differences between languages spoken by different ethnic groups within a country. This measure, computed by Fearson, determines the level of cultural diversity for 160 countries from the years 1946 to 2014 on a scale of 0 (perfectly homogenous) to 1 (highly fragmented). Based on prior studies, I hypothesize that more culturally diverse countries are less economically developed, since ethnic fragmentation has been viewed as a hindrance to the growth of economies.

I will also control for regime type based on the argument that both strongly democratic and autocratic regimes promote economic growth. To accomplish this, I will use the polity scores from the QOG dataset (`p_polity2`), which determines whether countries are strongly democratic (+10) or strongly autocratic (-10) for 182 countries from the years 1946 to 2012. For this variable, I hypothesize that countries with strongly democratic and autocratic regimes will have higher levels of real GDP per capita. Each control variable will be included in the regression test of women's social rights and real GDP per capita.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary of my regression test, which computed the relationship between women's social rights and real GDP per capita while controlling for economic globalization, cultural diversity, and regime type (polity) for the years 1981-2010. The results show that women's social rights have a statistically significant relationship to real GDP per capita with a p-value of less than .01. The coefficient for this variable, 1779.816, not only shows that improvements in women's social rights has a positive impact on real GDP per capita, but also illustrates that increases in women's social rights leads to a dramatic increase in real GDP per capita. Therefore, these results support my initial hypothesis in that higher levels of women's rights greatly improve a country's real GDP per capita.

My control variables were also found to be significantly related to real GDP per capita. Economic globalization has a statistically significant relationship with a p-value of .000. Although not as influential as women's social rights, economic globalization was also found to influence increases in real GDP per capita, as determined by the coefficient (295.825). In addition, table 1 illustrates that the relationship between cultural diversity and real GDP per capita is statistically significant and positively correlated. Contrary to my initial hypothesis, these results indicate that cultural diversity actually increases real GDP per capita by huge margins with a coefficient of 1944.989. Interestingly, the polity variable indicates that there is a curvilinear relationship between regime type and real GDP per capita. This was determined by creating a new variable, *polsq*, which represents the squared polity score. The curvilinear relationship is denoted by the fact that *p_polity* is negative (-83.376) while *polsq* is positive (92.909), supporting my initial hypothesis. This data suggests that strongly democratic and

autocratic regimes increase real GDP per capita, while it decreases in countries that fall in the middle.

Discussion

These results support my central hypothesis because they show that countries with better social rights for women have higher levels of real GDP per capita which implies that women greatly contribute to economic development. As mentioned earlier, this data suggests that women have the potential to improve real GDP per capita by significant margins, as determined by the size of the coefficient in this relationship. When women are afforded rights, they are able to influence their country's economic growth. As stated earlier, the CIRI dataset quantifies countries' social rights for women based on their provision and enactment of rights such as equal inheritance, education, and marital standards. Providing women with these rights not only expands their human capabilities and range of choices, but also allows them more equitable opportunities to compete with men which directly translates to economic improvements.

These results could also be explained by improvements in other areas of women's rights. As illustrated in prior studies, social rights are fundamental to the provision of political and economic rights because they reflect socio-cultural norms and traditional gender roles. For instance, greater educational access can shift social norms regarding women's domestic role in the house. These rights could allow women to express a higher degree of bargaining power within the household, leading to higher levels of empowerment. Therefore, social rights not only reshape traditional conceptions of gender orientations, but they also increase the intrinsic and extrinsic value that women have to themselves and to those in the household. This could explain why women's social rights were found to significantly influence variations in nations' real GDP per capita. However, it is also important to note the difficulty associated with shifting the

variable for women's social rights, especially using the CIRI measure, as it would take a lot to move a country from a score of 1 to 2 or 2 to 3. Although increases in women's rights improve real GDP per capita by a coefficient of 1779.816, it is very difficult to not only shift embedded social norms regarding women's rights, but to also enact and enforce these changes legally.

Therefore the CIRI measure reflects realistic characteristics of women's social rights in that it is very difficult to enact and enforce. This goes back to Victor Hiller's argument in that significant changes in women's rights require both structural and cultural transformations in relation to other embedded norms or else countries will be bound in a gender inequality trap (2014). From this information then, the CIRI score for countries' social rights can be considered static since it is difficult to change societal norms.

The results also support my initial hypothesis regarding the control variable for economic globalization. Increases in this measure were found to be positively correlated with increases in real GDP per capita which adds to prior arguments on this topic. Prior research suggests that the integration of countries into the international economy leads to tremendous growth in productivity because of the rise in trade and investment. The variable for economic globalization; however, does not account for political and social institutional change that must be established in order for actors to reap the benefits from this process. As argued by Dani Rodrik, the winners in the globalization paradox are countries that are able to complement freer trade with political protection of infant industries and tighter controls on capital flows (2011). Therefore, not all developing countries are able to accelerate their real GDP per capita by globalizing their economies. Overall, the data implies that when countries open their economies to the rest of the world, they are able to achieve economic growth, considering that they have governmental safeguards in place.

Contrary to my initial assumption, cultural diversity was found to substantially improve a country's real GDP per capita. Therefore, higher levels of ethnic fragmentation within a country are positively correlated with economic growth. Some scholars suggest that culturally diverse countries have populations with greater cultural capital which translates to better creativity and higher productivity (Bucci 2014). Cultural capital contributes to a more innovative society and allows new ideas and productive activities to flourish (Bucci 2014). In regards to Goren's argument, cultural diversity may spark ethnic conflict and lead to civil wars only in particular circumstances. However, if culturally diverse countries do not suffer from poor governance and corrupt institutions, economic growth could be promoted by their cultural attributes.

It was also interesting to find that this data supported my hypothesis in regards to political regime type. Similar to prior studies, the results show that when countries score at opposite ends of the polity scale, they significantly improve their GDP per capita. Therefore, strongly autocratic and strongly democratic regimes promote economic growth, revealing a curvilinear relationship between polity score and real GDP per capita. Democracies tend to have predictable outcomes and more legitimate governments that are able to acquire citizens' trust through the provision of guaranteed rights. This directly translates to more stable economic investments in democracies, which promotes greater economic growth (Jaron 2012). However, autocratic regimes, such as the Chinese government, also have economic stability since the rulers of these regimes tend to remain in power and enact consistent economic policies. Countries that score in the middle of the polity scale consist of less stable democracies and autocracies that may be subject to frequent policy changes and transitional governments. This suggests that less stable political regimes hinder economic growth due to greater uncertainties in economic markets.

Conclusion

These findings support my central argument, contributing to the idea that women are essential to the process of economic development. Providing women with greater access to social rights expands their human capabilities and accelerates their potential to contribute equitably to society. The fact that the world needed a UN Conference on women's rights in 1993 reveals that women's oppression is a global issue that requires immediate action. However, the Conference concluded without much resolve and countries continue to face tremendous gender disparities which are apparent throughout all social, political and economic institutions. After consulting data and prior studies, it is clear that simple shifts in women's social rights contribute to substantial gains in real GDP per capita. When women become empowered by attaining greater rights, they are able to access a better education, compete with men for higher skilled jobs, and empower other women to do the same. Since women consist of more than half the population, the provision of these rights leads to substantial economic benefits as greater percentages of women are able to contribute to economic production. This leads to shifts in social norms regarding women's capabilities and allows societies to pursue other political and economic rights for women. The relationship between women's social rights and economic development is substantially impacted by changes in economic globalization, cultural diversity, and political regimes as well. These processes and social attributes have been found to accelerate economic development, which can cycle back to greater empowerment for women. Overall, this research suggests that concerted efforts to shift gender norms have to be encouraged by society in order to influence sustainable changes in women's social rights that are both legally recognized and socially accepted. Until this is done, countries will remain trapped in a cycle of gender inequality

and economic inefficiency that will hinder any effort to advance societies and accelerate development.

Table 1. Women's Rights and Economic Development (1981-2010)

Women's Social Rights	1779.816 ^{***} (200.6322)
Econ. Globalization	295.825 ^{***} (8.463)
Cultural Diversity	1944.989 ^{***} (666.993)
Polity	-83.37576 ^{***} (22.936)
Polsq	92.90909 ^{***} (4.976)

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .1$ (two-tailed tests). Standard errors appear in parentheses.

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