

CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK STUDIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Prospects and Challenges

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BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN'S ECONOMIC FREEDOM

#Not stopping at vetkoeks

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ABSTRACT

Women are generally poorer than men. This, as highlighted by studies on the prerequisites for sustainable development, is often cited as a key challenge for women's economic emancipation. This gender inequality is rooted in the different roles in society of men and women. Women often have the role of caring for families and communities. Although caring for the next generation is an investment in human capital, it is hardly viewed in economic terms. Instead, it is used to exclude women from the formal workforce and the business world. Since their work is focused on the home, women often lack the time to engage in economically empowering projects and in the mainstream economy. This gross inequality between the social responsibilities that women carry restricts their economic activities mainly to informal trading, which hardly yields high turnover. Women are trapped in selling low-value commodities such as vetkoeks, *amanqina*, ginger beer, *umbona*, to name just a few. This keeps them trapped in poverty and limits their prospects of becoming influential businesswomen, especially when this is juxtaposed with the social and economic freedom experienced by men. Even though entrepreneurial capabilities captured in such small businesses can create the basis for economic progress for women, this progress is hardly realised, as many women remain informal traders with no hope for articulation into the mainstream economy. In addition to this social inequality, for Black women especially, this is made worse by the legacy of apartheid. Black women suffered in every facet of existence. They could not escape their lot by going to the cities and were denied access to jobs, land and landlady's rights. They also faced a lack of local job opportunities. This set them back further than their Black male counterparts suffering under the same system. This conceptual chapter interrogates the multi-layered challenges faced by enterprising Black women in South Africa and suggests ways of including these women in the mainstream economy.

KEYWORDS

Black women, economic freedom, enterprise, inequality

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is often said that this is a man's world. This is often proved true, at least in the world of business and the mainstream economy, where women find themselves becoming a kind of minority group. This male-dominated sector makes it hard for women to participate in the country's economic life (Handaragama, Rathnayake & Uluwaduge, 2013). As important as the role of women is in economic growth, especially for low-income families, they find themselves relegated to the periphery of the business world. This is a state that is rooted, perpetuated and maintained by different beliefs about women and men's positions in households, their right to resources and their roles in income generation (Handaragama et al., 2013).

This seems to be the case in African cultures especially, which often place great emphasis on the differences in the roles of women and men. Women are often highlighted as natural nurturers and domestic labourers, while their male counterparts are perceived as natural leaders and decision-makers. These beliefs about roles have been reinforced and passed down to the next generation at home, at school and through the media. They permeate social institutions such as the family, religious groups or caste systems, political and legal structures, economic and educational institutions and the mass media. These norms and values discriminate against women by legitimising and institutionalising social placements based on gender. In so doing, they disempower women, limiting the realisation of their social and economic potential, as well as the future possibilities of them becoming leaders (Handaragama et al., 2013).

For this reason, there has to be an organised and planned women's contribution in the economic sphere to deal with the inequalities. This requires proper gender planning strategies, with the goal of women's emancipation to achieve equality, equity and empowerment (Handaragama et al., 2013). For this to be possible, South Africans need to act together as a nation to bring about economic transformation. To do this, it is crucial to understand the magnitude of the challenges women have faced and are still facing (DTI Report, 2005). Therefore, this chapter interrogates the multi-layered challenges faced by enterprising Black women in South Africa by first looking at the historical context in which these women have had to operate. After that, it will discuss the global feminisation of poverty and then show that their empowerment is a matter of human rights. This chapter will also discuss some of the structures that need to be looked at in dismantling structural forces that keep women oppressed. The last sections will focus on women as drivers of economic growth and the strategies that would be helpful in empowering them.

Historical context

South African women are no strangers to the struggles and fight for equity and equality. Throughout history, women have had to fight for political, cultural and economic liberation, to name just a few. They have had to go against the strongly held belief that the domestic setting is the women's realm, while the public arena belongs to the men. Various South African literature indicates that before the most recent Bill of Rights was adopted in 1996, the struggle for equality in different sectors of society had been going on for almost a century. As a result, history is filled with events and people who have worked hard to bring the plight of women, as well as that of their communities to the fore.

One such event happened in 1913 when Black women protested against being forced to carry identification documents in urban areas. Although this was also required of Black men, it was women who took to the streets to fight against what they considered an injustice towards them and the Black community. Unfortunately, Black women did not only have to fight against the racialised treatment of South Africans, but the gendered economic structure as well, both in the Black community and in South Africa at large. For instance, Black women leaders such as Charlotte Maxeke, who in 1918 started the first formal women's organisation in South Africa, the Bantu Women's League, found themselves having to speak against the exclusion of women in Black liberation organisations. One such organisation was the South African Native National Convention (SANNC), an organisation that stood for the liberation of Black Africans and yet excluded Black women as members.

Maxeke, who was the first Black woman to receive a degree from Wilberforce University, Ohio, United States, was one of the women leaders who defied a world that refused to invest in women. She spoke up against the mistreatment of Black people, especially women. During this time, more women started voicing their grievances, showing the strength and capacity of Black women to empower themselves. These women included those like Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, who contributed to the advancement of women's rights in the 1920s through her writings and poetry that mirrored the critiques presented by Maxeke. Both women contributed to the Black press, arguing for the need for Black women to participate in the public sphere. With Maxeke's political and educational experience and class position, and Mqgqwetho's closeness to the press, they were able to make their opinions public, which was very difficult to do at that time. They were speaking in a society where Black people were not considered worthy of citizenship. Moreover, since they were women, especially Black women, their contributions were not seen as intellectual. However, these women did not stop, but continued to give exposure to the state of Black women in South Africa.

Women who spoke against the injustices towards Black women highlighted the right of women to receive an education, obtain paid employment, enter professions, vote and stand for elections, even though these things were all highly contested issues. The pushback they received led to many efforts by women to emerge from the oppression to which they were subjected. One of these efforts led to thousands of South African women bravely marching to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956 to turn the course of history. These women marched for freedom, equal representation, land rights and direct access to justice. They stood against the tyranny of an illegitimate system and the triple yoke of oppression of race, class and gender. This, if nothing else, demonstrates that women have always been instrumental in the country's political and economic sphere, playing a crucial role in the struggle and ushering in the new democratic order. Owing to their contributions, by the end of the century, human rights, which could be described as a part of the 'liberal democratic' political agenda, had been both recognised and established through laws and customary practice in the country. However, South African women still face multiple obstacles in enjoying these rights, especially in the world of business.

These struggles of women in South African history make clear the specific ways in which women were affected by colonialism and apartheid when compared to Black men. For instance, while South African history reveals that apartheid systematically and purposefully restricted the majority of South Africans from meaningful participation in the economy, it also shows that the conditions were harsher for Black women. Apartheid confined the creation of wealth to a racial minority and imposed underdevelopment on Black communities. This resulted in an economic structure that today, in essence, still excludes the vast majority of South Africans, especially women.

Global feminisation of poverty

This issue of women and their participation, or lack thereof, in the economy is not unique to South Africa. As indicated in various studies, even though women have become major role players in the economy of many countries today, their participation is still restricted by their political and socio-cultural situation. Many women live under patriarchal dominance, where they are treated as second-class citizens in their own countries. This has led to the feminisation of poverty because as the poor of the world become poorer, women become the poorest of them all. This issue of 'feminisation' of poverty is significant because, according to the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in Bentley (2004), the problem is not only statistically revealing the number of women who are affected by poverty, but rather that poverty for women tends to be more severe and poses greater challenges for them.

One of the contributing factors to this is economic globalisation. Bentley (2004) states that the rapid globalisation of the world's economies has brought in its wake not only structural adjustment programmes that weaken national economies and nation-states but also promotes forms of industrialisation and agriculture that are more exploitative of both human and natural resources. Statistics show that in these situations the female labour force is the most affected. This 'feminisation' of poverty is a reality that continues to plague the contemporary world (Bentley, 2004). Consequently, Bentley (2004) states that poverty in countries such as South Africa has a gender dimension that challenges the equal status of women in law and poses a threat to the realisation of their equal human rights in practice.

Women's economic freedom is a human rights issue

Women's rights are an inextricable component of their human rights. This is what Hodgson (2002) refers to as the "women's rights as human rights" approach to female equality and empowerment, something that echoes Article 18 of the Vienna Declaration on Human Rights of 1993. The fact that women still experience so many barriers in accessing basic human rights such as non-discrimination because of their gender explains why so many of them struggle in breaking through or succeeding in the business world. These barriers that affect women's participation in developmental opportunities include access to education, unfavourable economic structures such as limited access to credit facilities and financial skills training, traditions and the disregard of women's unpaid care work.

Women are also often exposed to incidents of violence in the home and the workplace that could affect their ability to enter and/or remain in the labour market. Women who work in vulnerable sectors of the economy, such as domestic workers or temporary workers, are disproportionately affected by violence at work, where unequal power relations, low pay, precarious working conditions and poor access to labour rights expose them to violence. Incidents of violence against women should not be viewed as isolated events but as an effect of systemic and structural gender inequality. Consequently, women continue to experience difficulties in entering the labour market, as well as being employed in sustainable occupations and positions. All these issues should be seen as a violation of human rights.

Even though many African women have some political, socio-economic and cultural rights, resources and representation, this has certainly not been a panacea for achieving full equality of citizenship or gender justice (Pailey, 2019). If women are to access their rights, there has to be an overhaul as a way of addressing the barriers they are faced with to create spaces where they can operate freely. According to Levendale (2017), creating an environment conducive to women's participation requires the dismantling and elimination of structural barriers, discriminatory laws and social norms to create equal economic opportunities and outcomes.

DISMANTLING STRUCTURAL FORCES OF MARGINALISATION

Governments' roles in facilitating women's economic emancipation

Governments either do not understand that investing in women is one of the most effective development tools to uplift women and children, or this is a fact that they have decided to ignore. Since women's participation in the economy stimulates economic growth and stops generational poverty, as they use their income to invest in their families, it is important for governments to facilitate their participation in mainstream economic activities. Governments are strategically placed to ensure that local government bodies include gender mainstreaming as a focus and pursue policies such as affirmative action in the awarding of opportunities, employment and tenders. Literature suggests that through international participation, parliamentarians are able to network with other countries and can learn from best practices in women's economic empowerment around the world.

Parliamentarians, as representatives of their constituents, also have the platform to create awareness and work towards removing the structural and social barriers to women's empowerment. Through their powers of oversight, they have an important role to play in overseeing the actions of government and ensuring the implementation of international and regional commitments undertaken to protect the rights and freedoms of women. They are also able to advocate for and introduce legislation to ensure the economic empowerment of women (Levendale, 2017). Where transformation for the advancement of women does not occur, parliament also has an opportunity to conduct oversight in this regard, interrogating annual budgets and expenditure frameworks to ensure that a gendered lens is used effectively.

National budgeting and its role in facilitating women's economic emancipation

Rustin and Nel (2011) point out that from a human rights framework, a national budget can be defined as a process through which financial resources are allocated in compliance with state obligations to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. Furthermore, the status of human rights and compliance with state obligations become the key determinants of the choices made relative to financial resource allocation. They explain that the state's human rights obligations should guide the ultimate purpose of government: to use all tools at its disposal to ensure that all human rights are enjoyed by all individuals. Thus, state obligations provide the priorities underlying the economic and administrative decisions reflected in the national budget.

The budget should be governed by the principles of equity, equality and non-discrimination. Public allocations should be fair and just and should be available to all citizens equally, without discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, social class

and age. Specific steps should be taken to ensure that vulnerable sectors of society are not discriminated against in the budget (Rustin & Nel, 2011). A decrease in social spending for example, on public health, education, transport, food and fertiliser subsidies has been a critical part of the 'structural adjustment programmes' imposed on many countries by the international financial institutions. This decrease has had a disastrous impact on the quality of life of populations in general, and on disadvantaged communities, such as women.

Cultural and traditional marginalisation

One of the most oppressive and limiting problems that culture imposes on women is the prohibition from inheriting land or owning property. In areas where communities still practice the communal land ownership system, married women do not have access to land. The land is owned by men and only unmarried women are given the right to own land. In some tribal areas, widows are also dispossessed of the land by their husbands' relatives especially if their children are minors or they do not have male children. Rural women are disproportionately affected by this issue even though rural women are undeniably powerful catalysts for sustainable development and agents against poverty. According to the UN Women Report (2011), if rural women had equal access to productive resources, agricultural yields could reduce the number of chronically hungry people by between 100 million and 150 million. Additionally, the centrality of rural women to socio-economic well-being has been recognised as they actively support their households and communities in achieving food security and nutrition, generating income from farm and non-farm activities, maintaining biodiversity and preserving traditional norms and knowledge. However, studies show persistent gaps that have an impact on the lives of rural women, despite their contributions (United Nations, 2012 in Osita-Njoku & Chikere, 2015). Women have a long way to go before they can fully and practically realise the rights guaranteed to them by law. It is, therefore, commendable that equality at law is taken seriously in South Africa (Van Staden, 2019).

Bentley (2004) critically states that patriarchy, which is present in all races and cultures in South Africa, has endured in the post-apartheid era. While it has to exist besides a regime of human rights and equality before the law, which it previously did not, it has taken on new guises. One of the most effective of these is the claim that gender inequality is a feature of culture and tradition. Therefore, to challenge it is to tamper with the fabric of society in a way that violates the right of groups to self-determination. What these claims do is perpetuate the unequal treatment of women in the home, the family and the mainstream economy. The issue is often portrayed as culture *versus* rights. However, the unequal status of women culturally is what underlies a national culture of discrimination against them, reflected in both their economic disenfranchisement and staggering levels of violence.

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Pailey (2019) takes the argument further, stating that African women have had to overcome constraints imposed on them not only by patriarchy, but also by histories of slavery, colonialism, structural adjustment, land dispossession, militarism and neoliberalism. Scholars of land and gender have argued that in agrarian economies, which predominate on the African continent, the unequal distribution of land and limited land rights for women reproduce gender inequalities and relegate African women to a lifetime of poverty and second-class citizenship (Butegwa, 1991 in Pailey, 2019; Tsikata, 2009; Wanyeki, 2003). Even in cases where land legislation is passed, upholding gender equality norms, African women still face major obstacles in accessing the land (Ravborg, Spichinger, Broegaard & Pedersen, 2016 in Pailey, 2019).

Even though many things have changed for Black women in South Africa, they are still treated as lesser than men, as well as lesser than White women. Gender norms dictate the role of women and men and also their opportunities regarding the types of work available to them, both in urban and rural areas. In some societies, these norms restrict women's mobility and engagement in productive work outside their homes. For example, women's entrepreneurship is not broadly accepted in many societies and women face attitudinal obstacles in starting, consolidating and developing a sustainable business.

Across the African continent, the very idea that women should own land remains a legal notice. They have often been subordinated in the domestic or private sphere, with gendered values and norms that undermine their agency in the public sphere.

Women as drivers of economic growth

As disheartening as these challenges faced by women are, many of them have not been deterred from economic participation in their countries. As a result of this determination, many women have become drivers of economic growth. During the International Women's Conference, held in August 2017, it was shown that women in Southern Africa form one of the fastest-growing markets with great purchasing power. However, the composition of organisations and institutions involved in supplying, designing and marketing goods and services do not reflect this market. Two years prior, in 2015, the then Minister for Small Business Development, Lindiwe Zulu, also pointed out that women are powerful economic drivers when they are meaningfully involved in the economy through entrepreneurial activities and employment in decision-making roles. She asserted that their time had come to take their rightful place in all sectors of society, especially the economy. According to Zulu (2015), the greater inclusion of women in the economy could be the elixir to reduce unemployment, poverty and inequality as envisioned in the National Development

Plan 2030. She made this statement in light of the fact that when more women join the labour force in developed and developing countries, especially as entrepreneurs, there is always a rise in gross domestic product.

Not only that, but according to the SADC Gender Protocol Barometer (2011), women entrepreneurs are known to use profits from their business to improve their families' living conditions and lifestyle. They invest up to 90% of their earnings in their families' health and education, as well as in their communities. More critically, they invest in their children's education, which ensures that the cycle of poverty gets broken. When women have been empowered, they, in turn, contribute to their family's income and become active change leaders in their communities. There is no denying that if you build a woman, you build a community; and a \$1 investment in a woman is a smart investment. When she is empowered, her generation and her family are empowered (Bokoyeibo, 2018).

However, even with such benefits, the full potential of South African women on the economic front is still to be realised as the remnants of apartheid and societal obstacles continue to block them. Women continue to be side-lined from accessing opportunities for significant economic empowerment. They continue to largely exist on the periphery of economic decision-making (SADC Gender Protocol Barometer, 2011). Furthermore, they face an array of challenges to becoming economically empowered and independent. The complete integration of women into the economy will go a long way in the fight against the triple challenge of unemployment, inequality and poverty.

Women empowerment strategies

Prioritising the advancement of women, particularly their participation in the economy, could encourage them to take their rightful place in society. As such, gender equality and women's empowerment should be central to the transformation agenda, placed at the heart of efforts to stimulate sustainable development (Zulu, 2015). This is not to say that the process will be an easy one. There is no simple solution to ensuring that women are economically empowered. Such a task requires a multifaceted approach that addresses structural inequalities at the grassroots, cultural and political levels (Levendale, 2017).

This approach includes the promotion of women's economic and social rights by building alliances between women's rights groups and human rights groups. It highlights the importance of supporting linkages between women's groups and other social movements that work in the area of economic and social justice. For instance, trade unions, farmers' organisations, groups working for media and cultural freedom, environmental rights groups, groups working for the rights of minority and

indigenous communities should become natural allies in this work. There is also a need for developing conceptual bridges between forms of gender-based discrimination and other forms of discrimination based on differences such as race, ethnicity, language, religion, age and sexual preference. This would link not only an understanding of the issues at hand but also activism across sectors and across national and regional borders. However, as progressive and effective as this would be, bringing a gender-sensitive approach to the work of these various groups, remains a major challenge.

It is also crucial that whatever approaches are adopted in dealing with this issue, they lead to sustainable community impact and women's development. Bokoyeibo (2018) asserts that even though this can be a heavy task, it is possible if everyone makes little actions with value and lifelong impact as individuals, development organisations, national and international government agencies and private and public companies. In line with this, Bokoyeibo (2018) suggests five strategies for empowering women. These strategies are adult education and training, the development of vocational and business skills, access to financial facilities, health issues and social groups and mentorship. These strategies are described in detail in the sections that follow:

■ *Strategy 1: Adult education and training*

Lack of access to quality adult education and training is one of the greatest barriers to the sustainable development of women, which is why the first strategy of adult education and training is so important. It focuses on investing and building the capacities of rural women to improve their business, social, economic and financial skills, and provides adult education including life and social skills training. Adult education and training, specifically entrepreneurship education, is a huge industry that can be channelled to help empower women. This access to quality, holistic, personal, emotional and entrepreneurial development training opportunities will empower women to speak for themselves. Additionally, it develops confidence for them to speak up against abuse and violence, helping them rise and become voices of positive change and advocacy for equality, justice and progress.

■ *Strategy 2: The development of vocational and business skills*

The second strategy is the development of vocational and business skills. Women need to be empowered through hands-on vocational skills training, entrepreneurship and micro-business expansion opportunities – the basic tools to start, operate, build and expand their businesses. Women who are involved in farming, fishing and trades require help to become more efficient in all sectors within their communities. It is suggested that agencies can design women's development programmes that are focused on providing core skills that can help them access markets to sell their farm products, understand the value chain of their industry and the basics of micro business management and operations.

■ *Strategy 3: Access to financial facilities*

The third strategy looks at access to financial facilities: access to microloans, equipment, business management and operational tools. A woman who has committed herself to work will do more and multiply her efforts if she has access to basic tools for effectiveness and productivity. Project or programme designs focused on women empowerment should help women access interest-free loans, basic business tools and equipment. One of the keys to creating multipliers in the building of sustainable small businesses in communities is helping women have access to basic facilitating tools for their daily engagement.

■ *Strategy 4: Health issues*

The fourth strategy focuses on health issues. Research shows that women are vulnerable to every form of health issue in different communities. They are the bearers of the epidemics of deadly communicable diseases. For instance, among women, there is a high rate of maternal and infant mortality, HIV/AIDS and other lethal diseases. Women in rural communities tend to be affected more by these health challenges. Individuals, organisations and agencies can design projects that focus on providing affordable healthcare and training for women on healthy living, getting and taking clean water, keeping a clean and green environment and access to basic monthly menstrual and maternal care. Creating and providing health facilities for women contributes to the safety of a quarter of the world's population.

■ *Strategy 5: Social groups and mentorship*

The fifth strategy deals with social groups and mentorship. Cooperative learning and social groups contribute to the growth and empowerment of women. When women find themselves in a like-minded supportive group in their community, they find the courage to have an open discussion about the challenges they face. This also provides a system of accountability and responsibility among members and leads to personal and group growth. Mentorship is another important thing that needs to be done consistently in the development of women. Platforms created for women's mentorship and development in different communities will go far in helping to empower women to be confident, powerful and resourceful to live up to their true potentials.

These strategies are part of an attempt to empower women, which is a continuous endeavour in response to the dynamics of socio-cultural or economic changes that occur rapidly in the era of globalisation. Programmes to enhance women's education and professionalism is an unavoidable future requirement. To compensate for the problems of the world's rapid and competitive growth, a paradigm shift in the

evolution of women's roles is required, and the new paradigm is fundamentally a notion of gender-oriented development. As a result, it is expected to be able to create a shift in the viewpoint that inspires, with planned and tangible measures.

Governments and businesses all over the world now acknowledge women's economic empowerment as important in its own right as it is for human progress and business success. It has been hailed as a key driver of economic growth, a pre-condition for poverty reduction and the foundation for ensuring every child has a sustainable future. Collaboration with various parties, particularly non-governmental groups at the regional level, must be established and carried out in order to establish a cooperative business network. Cooperation is carried out in order to offer the community the greatest possible participation of women in decision-making.

Implications for social work practice: 'Social worker voices'

As the cornerstone of social development, women's economic liberation resonates well within the social work profession. This is aligned with the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2012), which aims to identify and confront "the profoundly unjust, unfair, and, above all, unsustainable social, economic, and political system of the contemporary world" (Tasse, 2014:283). It is the state's responsibility to make decisions to accomplish the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development's goals through welfare systems, in which women are regarded as active targets in the theme of economic opportunity, which means empowering their households, not just themselves. Contrary to this, a social development approach to social work stresses the importance of women not just receiving services, but also being critically engaged as productive people with capacities through approaches that emphasise social investment as a means of providing services. To address the plight of women who are excluded from economic opportunities, approaches such as social investment approach are necessary, as supported by Patel (2015). The social investment approach is posited by Patel (2015) as favouring policies and programmes that are long-term investments in human development as well as positive economic and social outcomes. To address the plight of women regarding economic liberation, social workers, as frontline workers, should actively participate in social policy formulation. Social policies are as social investment in a society that yields positive social and economic benefits (Morel, Palier & Palme, 2009). It is imperative that social workers have voices in the social policy space to promote, through advocacy, the economic participation of women in the mainstream economy through investing in human capital development as long-term to alleviate the hardships of women in addition to being restricted to only 'selling vetkoeks'.

CONCLUSION

The wider socio-economic context continues to have a substantial influence on the well-being of South Africans, particularly women who bear the burden of poverty. Despite socio-economic gains over the preceding two and a half decades of democracy, South Africa's wealth and income distribution remain the world's second most unequal. There are still substantial inequalities in socio-economic status based on race and gender. These concerns must be addressed before significant advances in women's economic empowerment can be achieved. The main task presently is to guarantee that the country's progress is accelerated towards better levels of economic development and job creation, as well as a more inclusive economy. Civil society must be able to play this crucial role by overcoming barriers to continuous advocacy activities and sustained development of democracy in South Africa, both inside and outside government. The empowerment of women will inevitably lead to a world that views violence against women as an outlier. It will be a world where mainstream society refuses to tolerate gender-based violence, domestic violence and human trafficking. A place where women are not underpaid, where women participate in politics and the economy, where girls have access to education and where women can fully participate in the private sector. It is important for the world to put in place mechanisms to make sure that practices that oppress women do not thrive.

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