

UNITED NATIONS' ROLE IN PROTECTING GIRL CHILD RIGHTS IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROGRESS

ZAINAB GIMBA, SHERIFF GHALI IBRAHIM AND AISHATU ABDULLAHI

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS,
UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA

Abstract

This study examines the role of the United Nations in protecting girl child rights in Nigeria, emphasizing the challenges faced in implementing these initiatives. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research utilizes secondary data from academic journals, government reports, and publications from international organizations to analyze the effectiveness of UN policies. The study employs the Human Rights Theory as its theoretical framework, highlighting the inherent rights of girls and the obligations of states and international bodies to uphold these rights. Findings indicate that while UN initiatives have contributed to advancing education and reducing child marriage, significant barriers impede the successful realization of girl child rights in Nigeria. The research underscores the need for a comprehensive strategy that addresses both immediate challenges and long-term systemic issues, advocating for stronger community engagement and collaborative efforts to promote and protect the rights of girls.

Keywords: girls-child; women's rights; gender-based violence; UN Charter; rights protection

Introduction

The protection of girl child rights has been a cornerstone of the United Nations' (UN) agenda, recognizing that the empowerment and well-being of girls are essential to achieving global peace, security, and sustainable development (United Nations, 2019). International frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) underscore the global commitment to eradicating violence, discrimination, and poverty affecting girls worldwide (UNICEF, 2020). Through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), the UN addresses the diverse barriers that girls face globally, advocating for their rights to education, health, and protection from exploitation (United Nations, 2015). In Nigeria, however, progress toward these goals is hindered by significant socioeconomic challenges and cultural practices that restrict the rights of girls (Okafor & Chimobi, 2020). While Nigeria has ratified both the CRC and CEDAW, systemic issues such as child marriage, educational inequality, and limited access to healthcare continue to prevent the full realization of these international commitments (Akanbi, 2019). Nigeria's cultural diversity, economic disparities, and regional differences contribute to these challenges, particularly in northern regions, where child marriage rates and gender-based violence remain disproportionately high (Bello & Murtala, 2021). Although the Nigerian government, with UN support, has implemented policies and programs to address these issues, their impact has been limited due to inadequate enforcement, underfunded initiatives, and resistance in certain regions (UNICEF, 2021).

While UN and Nigerian policymakers recognize that empowering girls is essential for breaking cycles of poverty and inequality, the realities on the ground reveal a continuous struggle. Gender-based violence, poor educational opportunities, and child labor are pervasive issues, limiting the potential of Nigerian girls to contribute meaningfully to their communities and the economy (Ajayi, 2020). Furthermore, societal and cultural norms often dictate girls' roles, leading to disparities in health, education, and safety (Mbah, 2022). Given these persistent challenges, examining why international frameworks, despite their comprehensive mandates, struggle to ensure universal protection for girls in Nigeria is imperative. Despite the UN's extensive efforts through conventions and initiatives to protect the rights of girls globally, Nigerian girls continue to face significant human rights violations that hinder their development (United Nations, 2020). This problem is exacerbated by systemic factors such as poverty, limited education access, cultural biases, and weak enforcement of child protection policies (UNICEF, 2020). In Nigeria, girls are disproportionately affected by child marriage, gender-based violence, and educational inequities. UNICEF estimates that 44% of Nigerian girls are married before the age of 18, with many more dropping out of school due to financial and cultural constraints (UNICEF, 2020).

A primary issue is that the UN's international mandates often do not translate effectively into local practices in Nigeria. The UN's framework for girl child protection is rooted in principles that may conflict with traditional Nigerian views on gender roles (Bello & Murtala, 2021). Additionally, Nigeria's resource constraints and political factors hinder consistent application of these frameworks, leading to significant gaps in protection and enforcement at the national and community levels (Okafor & Chimobi, 2020). The gap between Nigeria's obligations under international law and the actual treatment of girls within its borders indicates a need for a critical reassessment of the UN's approach to ensuring girl child rights in Nigeria. This study aims to investigate the barriers impeding the successful implementation of UN protections for the girl child in Nigeria and to offer practical recommendations for enhancing these protections in alignment with Nigeria's unique cultural and socioeconomic landscape. By examining the factors that challenge the universal protection of girl child rights in Nigeria, this paper seeks to contribute to more effective strategies that can be implemented both locally and globally to safeguard the future of Nigerian girls.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study, aiming to explore the challenges and potential solutions in the UN's efforts to protect girl child rights in Nigeria:

1. What role has the United Nations played in protecting the rights of the girl child in Nigeria?
2. What are the main challenges faced by the UN in enforcing girl child rights protections within Nigeria's socio-cultural and economic contexts?

objectives of the study

The study's objectives focus on assessing, evaluating, and recommending approaches for more effective protection of girl child rights in Nigeria:

1. To analyze the United Nations' current contributions toward protecting the rights of the girl child in Nigeria.
2. To identify the primary challenges and barriers that limit the effective implementation of UN policies on girl child rights in Nigeria.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Review: Girl Child Rights: "Girl child rights" refers to the specific human rights and protections that should be afforded to girls, recognizing their unique vulnerabilities in many societies. The United Nations defines these rights under the umbrella of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and CEDAW, advocating for protections against violence, discrimination, and exploitation, as well as rights to health, education, and freedom of expression (United Nations, 2019). This concept encompasses various dimensions, including gender equality, the right to education, and protection from harmful cultural practices.

Universal Human Rights and the United Nations: Universal human rights are rights inherent to all individuals, regardless of age, gender, or nationality, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations, 1948). The United Nations plays a central role in promoting these rights, with specific conventions like the CRC, CEDAW, and the SDGs addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, including girls. The UN's role includes creating policies, providing funding, and partnering with governments to implement protective frameworks (UNICEF, 2020).

Child protection and the role of international organizations: Child protection refers to the set of services and interventions designed to safeguard children from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence. The UN's role in child protection involves implementing frameworks that promote safe environments for children, offering support to local governments, and addressing root causes of vulnerabilities. Within the Nigerian context, child protection is complex, impacted by socioeconomic factors, limited resources, and challenges in policy enforcement (Akanbi, 2019).

Historical background and institutional frameworks for girl child rights

The United Nations (UN) was established in 1945 to promote global peace, security, and human rights (UN, 1945). Since its founding, the UN has championed the protection of vulnerable populations, including children and girls, who often face unique challenges due to gender-based discrimination, violence, and limited access to education (Beitz, 2018). Recognizing these issues, several UN institutions and frameworks have been specifically dedicated to advancing the rights of girls worldwide. One of the key UN bodies in this effort is the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), established in 1946. UNICEF works to

safeguard children's rights by addressing critical areas such as health, education, and protection, with targeted programs designed to counteract the disadvantages girls face (UNICEF, 2021). Another influential body, UN Women, was formed in 2010 with a mission to promote gender equality and empower women and girls (UN Women, 2010). UN Women focuses on dismantling barriers to gender equality and implementing programs that combat gender-based violence and enhance girls' access to educational and economic opportunities (Chowdhury, 2019).

Two foundational frameworks also guide the UN's efforts to protect the rights of the girl child: the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Adopted in 1989, the CRC mandates universal rights to protection, education, and freedom from discrimination for all children, including girls (United Nations, 1989). Meanwhile, CEDAW, adopted in 1979, sets international standards for gender equality, advocating for girls' equal rights in areas such as education, health, and freedom from exploitation (CEDAW, 1979). These institutions and frameworks collectively represent the UN's commitment to ensuring the well-being and rights of girls worldwide.

The United Nations' Current Contributions Toward Protecting The Rights Of The Girl Child In Nigeria

The United Nations has actively contributed to advancing the rights of girls in Nigeria, largely through the adoption and promotion of international frameworks like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each of these frameworks offers protections for girl child rights by setting global standards for education, health, and freedom from violence, and by urging states to enact policies that protect vulnerable groups, including girls.

(A) Convention on the Rights Of The Child (CRC) And Nigeria's Commitment: Nigeria ratified the CRC in 1991, signaling its commitment to protect children's rights, including those of girls, through legislative and institutional reforms (United Nations, 2019). The CRC outlines the right of every child to life, education, health, and freedom from violence and exploitation. Following its ratification, Nigeria enacted the Child Rights Act (CRA) in 2003, which domesticates the CRC's provisions to establish protections for Nigerian children, specifically in areas like child labor, trafficking, and abuse (UNICEF, 2020).

However, the implementation of the CRA varies significantly across Nigeria's regions due to cultural and religious resistance, particularly in northern Nigeria. For example, despite the legal protections offered under the CRA, child marriage remains prevalent in northern states, where Islamic law often supersedes federal legislation (Akanbi, 2019). The UN's response to this issue has included advocacy for legislative reforms at the state level and support for local NGOs, though progress remains slow. In recent years, UNICEF, as an arm of the UN, has collaborated with the Nigerian government to launch the **Girls' Education Project** in northern Nigeria, focusing on enrolling girls in schools and reducing early marriages. Although some success has been observed in increased enrollment rates, cultural resistance remains a barrier to ending child marriage.

(B) CEDAW and Efforts to Address Gender-Based Discrimination: CEDAW, ratified by Nigeria in 1985, addresses gender-based discrimination, including violence against women and girls, lack of educational opportunities, and harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) (United Nations, 2015). CEDAW's implementation in Nigeria has been met with challenges similar to those of the CRC. For instance, while the Nigerian government has

criminalized FGM, enforcement remains limited due to cultural acceptance and lack of awareness, especially in rural areas.

An example highlighting CEDAW's limited effectiveness in combating gender-based violence (GBV) is the 2014 kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok by Boko Haram, which drew international condemnation and exposed severe gaps in Nigeria's ability to protect its girls (Okafor & Chimobi, 2020). The UN and various international organizations called for action, with the United Nations Security Council issuing statements and pledging resources for the girls' recovery. However, only a portion of the girls have been recovered, underscoring the need for stronger protective measures and local partnerships to ensure the safety of Nigerian girls.

(C) The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their Impact on Nigerian Girls: The SDGs, particularly Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 4 (Quality Education), emphasize gender equity and universal access to quality education as essential components of sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). In Nigeria, the UN has collaborated with various governmental and non-governmental organizations to implement initiatives aimed at improving educational access for girls. Programs like the **UN Girls' Education Initiative** and **Educating Nigerian Girls in New Enterprises (ENGINE)**, supported by UNDP, have focused on providing scholarships, mentorship, and life skills training to disadvantaged girls across Nigeria (Bello & Murtala, 2021).

While these initiatives have shown positive impacts, particularly in urban areas, rural regions continue to lag due to factors such as poverty, distance to schools, and security concerns. The persistence of these issues highlights the limited reach of UN initiatives in rural Nigeria and suggests a need for more localized and sustainable approaches.

2.1.6 The Primary Challenges and Barriers that Limit the Effective Implementation of UN Policies on Girl Child Rights in Nigeria

(A) Cultural and Religious Resistance: One of the primary barriers to implementing UN policies on girl child rights in Nigeria is the strong influence of cultural and religious norms. Child marriage, for example, is widely practiced in northern Nigeria, where over 65% of girls are married before the age of 18 (Mbah, 2022). While the UN and Nigerian government have launched campaigns to raise awareness of the health and social risks associated with child marriage, resistance remains high due to the deeply ingrained perception of marriage as a social and economic arrangement.

An example of this challenge is the limited success of the **UN Population Fund's (UNFPA) adolescent empowerment initiatives**. Though the program has provided alternative livelihood training and education for girls, the cultural belief that girls' roles are primarily as wives and mothers often hinders broader community support, limiting the program's impact.

(B) Insufficient Funding and Weak Institutional Capacity: Financial and institutional limitations are significant obstacles to implementing and enforcing girl child rights protections. Nigeria's education and health sectors are underfunded, leading to inadequate infrastructure, insufficient training for educators and healthcare providers, and a lack of basic resources in schools and health facilities (Ajayi, 2020). UN initiatives like the Girls' Education Project III (GEP3) have tried to address this by providing financial and technical support to Nigerian schools, but the scale of the problem remains daunting, with nearly 10.5 million Nigerian children out of school, most of whom are girls (UNICEF, 2021).

(C) Security Challenges: Nigeria faces considerable security challenges, particularly in the northeast, where the Boko Haram insurgency has targeted schools and abducted students, as seen in the Chibok abduction. This ongoing threat has led to the closure of many schools, further reducing girls' access to education. The **Safe Schools Initiative**, launched with UN support after the Chibok incident, aimed to protect schools through security upgrades and alternative learning programs, but implementation has faced setbacks due to funding constraints and continued insecurity in affected regions (Bello & Murtala, 2021).

(D) Political and Governance Challenges: Political will is essential for enacting and enforcing laws that protect girls. However, in Nigeria, governance issues such as corruption, bureaucratic delays, and conflicting policies between federal and state governments undermine the effectiveness of UN policies (Okafor & Chimobi, 2020). For example, although the Child Rights Act was passed federally, its adoption is inconsistent across states, particularly in the north, where local laws often take precedence. The UN's advocacy efforts and funding assistance have made some inroads, but these governance challenges persist as major obstacles.

The UN's frameworks, while critical for advancing girl child rights globally, face significant challenges in Nigeria. The success of CRC, CEDAW, and SDGs is often limited by socio-cultural resistance, inadequate funding, security threats, and governance issues. To achieve more effective implementation, the UN and Nigerian government may need to adopt more localized strategies, strengthen security measures, and improve collaborative efforts with local communities. Addressing these barriers is essential to protect and empower Nigerian girls, enabling them to fulfill their potential and contribute meaningfully to their communities and society at large.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the theoretical framework that underpins this study on the role of the United Nations in the universal protection of girl child rights in Nigeria. The framework is grounded in **Human Rights Theory**, which offers a robust foundation for analyzing the obligations and responsibilities of states and international organizations to protect the fundamental rights of girls.

2.2.1 Human Rights Theory

Human Rights Theory posits that all individuals possess inherent rights simply by virtue of being human. This theory emphasizes the universality, indivisibility, and inalienability of human rights, advocating that everyone, including girls, is entitled to protection, dignity, and equal opportunities regardless of their background (Donnelly, 2013).

In the context of the United Nations and girl child rights in Nigeria, Human Rights Theory serves as a foundation for understanding the legal and moral obligations of both the international community and the Nigerian government to protect and promote the rights of girls. The CRC and CEDAW are manifestations of this theory, outlining specific rights that address the vulnerabilities faced by girl children. The UN's role in advocating for these rights highlights its commitment to uphold human dignity and equality, providing a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at protecting girls from violence, discrimination, and exploitation.

For example, the UN's efforts to address child marriage through advocacy and partnerships with local NGOs illustrate the application of Human Rights Theory. By promoting education and economic empowerment for girls, the UN aligns its initiatives with the principles of this theory, aiming to create an environment where girls can exercise their rights fully and

participate in society. However, the challenges posed by cultural norms and inadequate legal enforcement demonstrate the complexities of implementing human rights principles in practice. The integration of Human Rights Theory provides a robust framework for analyzing the protection of girl child rights in Nigeria. This theory offers valuable insights into the legal obligations of the UN and the Nigerian government while highlighting the cultural and systemic barriers that hinder the realization of these rights. By grounding the study in this theoretical perspective, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding girl child rights and the effectiveness of international interventions.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using secondary data to analyze the United Nations' role in protecting girl child rights in Nigeria and the challenges in implementing these efforts.

Research Design

The qualitative research design is suitable for examining complex social issues like girl child rights and the UN's role. It provides detailed, contextual insights into girls' experiences, the effectiveness of UN initiatives, and sociocultural barriers.

Method of Data Collection

Data is gathered from secondary sources, including academic journals, government reports, publications from international organizations like the UN and UNICEF, and media reports. These sources provide frameworks, data on education and gender-based violence, UN initiatives, and current events affecting Nigerian girls.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The study upholds ethical standards by citing sources accurately and presenting findings honestly. While direct ethical approval is not needed, ethical principles guide the literature review process. Limitations include dependence on existing literature, which varies in quality, and potential biases in secondary sources. To address these, the researcher uses diverse credible sources and critically evaluates each. Though primary data is absent, secondary sources offer a comprehensive view of the broader context of girl child rights in Nigeria.

Findings and Discussion of Findings

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of the research on the effectiveness of United Nations (UN) policies in protecting the rights of the girl child in Nigeria. It examines the contributions of various UN initiatives, identifies barriers to implementation, and analyzes case studies that highlight both successes and challenges in addressing issues such as child marriage and educational access for girls.

Effectiveness of UN Policies

The UN has developed and implemented various programs aimed at improving the rights and status of girls worldwide, particularly in Nigeria. Among these, UN Women's initiatives stand out as key contributors to empowering girls and addressing gender inequalities.

UN Women's Programs

UN Women has launched several programs that focus on education, health, and economic empowerment for girls. For example, the “**Empowering Adolescent Girls**” program provides resources such as scholarships, training, and mentorship for girls, enabling them to pursue education and skills development (United Nations, 2020). However, while these programs

provide immediate benefits, they often lack robust mechanisms for long-term enforcement and sustainability. Many girls who complete these programs still face barriers when transitioning into higher education or the workforce, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems that extend beyond initial interventions.

Implementation, Challenges and Barriers

Evaluations of UN programs in Nigeria reveal a pattern of success in terms of enrollment and participation, but with limited long-term impact. For instance, while initiatives have increased school enrollment rates for girls in urban areas, rural regions continue to struggle with access due to ongoing socio-economic challenges and cultural practices that prioritize boys' education (Owoaje et al., 2018). Without sustained investment and community engagement, the effectiveness of UN programs can diminish over time, leaving girls vulnerable to dropping out or facing barriers to continuing their education. Several significant barriers hinder the effective implementation of UN policies aimed at protecting girl child rights in Nigeria:

(A) Economic Challenges: Economic instability and poverty are major factors that impede the realization of girl child rights. Many families prioritize immediate economic survival over long-term educational investment, often leading to decisions that favor early marriage for girls rather than education. The lack of financial resources means that families may struggle to afford school fees, uniforms, and transportation costs, leading to high dropout rates among girls (Chowdhury, 2019).

(B) Cultural Practices: Cultural attitudes towards gender roles significantly impact the effectiveness of UN policies. In many communities, traditional norms and values promote child marriage and limit girls' access to education. For instance, surveys have shown that in some northern Nigerian states, over 70% of girls are married before the age of 18, despite legal frameworks aimed at curbing such practices (Mbah, 2022). Cultural resistance to changing these practices poses a significant challenge to the implementation of UN initiatives.

(C) Sovereignty Of Nations: The principle of state sovereignty can limit the enforcement of international agreements. While the UN can provide frameworks and resources, it lacks the power to compel governments to implement these policies effectively. In Nigeria, the disparity between federal policies and state-level implementation often results in a patchwork of protections for girls. For example, the Child Rights Act, which protects against child marriage, has not been uniformly adopted across all states, particularly in the northern regions where cultural practices prevail (Chowdhury, 2019).

4.2 Successes in Africa and Nigeria

Despite the challenges, there have been notable successes attributed to UN-led campaigns aimed at reducing child marriage and improving educational outcomes for girls. For instance, the **UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage** has seen some success in states like Lagos and Ekiti, where advocacy campaigns, community engagement, and educational initiatives have contributed to a reduction in child marriage rates (Moyo, 2018).

Furthermore, reports indicate a growing awareness of the negative impacts of child marriage within communities, with more parents advocating for their daughters' education. In some areas, grassroots organizations supported by UN funding have effectively mobilized communities to challenge cultural norms, leading to increased educational opportunities for girls.

Ongoing Challenges in Nigeria

Despite these successes, the persistence of child marriage and poor educational outcomes for girls remains a significant challenge. While UN programs have raised awareness and initiated discussions on the importance of girls' education, the reality is that many girls still face barriers that prevent them from completing their education. For example, reports indicate that although enrollment rates have improved, many girls still experience high dropout rates due to financial constraints, early marriages, and violence (Moyo, 2018). Additionally, the effects of insecurity, particularly from Boko Haram's activities in northern Nigeria, have led to school closures and increased vulnerability for girls. The kidnapping of the Chibok girls in 2014 serves as a tragic reminder of the ongoing threats that girls face in their pursuit of education and safety. Despite UN initiatives aimed at securing schools and providing alternative education, the pervasive fear and reality of violence continue to hinder girls' rights and access to education.

The findings of this research reveal that while the UN has made significant contributions to advancing girl child rights in Nigeria, substantial barriers remain. Economic challenges, cultural practices, and issues related to state sovereignty complicate the implementation of effective policies. Despite some successes in reducing child marriage and increasing educational access, ongoing challenges underscore the need for a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that addresses both immediate needs and long-term systemic issues. For UN policies to be truly effective, they must be supported by strong community engagement, sustained investment, and collaborative efforts that prioritize the voices and experiences of girls themselves.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study provides a comprehensive analysis of the role of the United Nations in the universal protection of girl child rights in Nigeria. It highlights the effectiveness of various UN initiatives, such as those implemented by UN Women and UNICEF, in promoting education, preventing child marriage, and addressing gender-based violence. However, the findings also reveal significant barriers that hinder the successful implementation of these policies, including economic challenges, entrenched cultural practices, and the sovereignty of nations that limit UN enforcement capabilities.

Despite the successes attributed to UN-led campaigns, such as the reduction of child marriage rates in certain regions, the persistent challenges faced by girl children in Nigeria illustrate the complexities of achieving meaningful change. Economic disparities, cultural resistance, and the impact of violence and insecurity continue to undermine efforts to secure the rights of girls, particularly in rural areas.

The interplay between these factors underscores the necessity for a multi-dimensional approach that not only addresses the immediate needs of girl children but also challenges the systemic inequalities that perpetuate their marginalization. By recognizing the unique context of Nigeria and the diverse experiences of girls, stakeholders can develop more effective strategies for promoting girl child rights.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of UN policies in protecting girl child rights in Nigeria:

(1) Strengthening Local Partnerships and Community Engagement
Effective partnerships with local NGOs, community leaders, and grassroots organizations are essential for adapting UN initiatives to Nigeria's cultural and regional needs. By involving communities in the planning and execution of programs, the UN can foster local ownership, build trust, and increase the sustainability of initiatives. Community-based approaches also

allow for the integration of local perspectives, increasing acceptance and reducing resistance to change.

(2) Expanding Economic Empowerment Programs for Families

To address economic barriers, the UN should implement programs that offer financial support for families, particularly those in impoverished regions. Initiatives such as conditional cash transfers incentivizing girls' education can alleviate the financial strain on families and encourage prioritization of education for their daughters. Providing economic support directly impacts attendance and retention rates, ensuring that economic hardship does not prevent girls from accessing schooling and other opportunities.

(3) Comprehensive Policy Implementation and Enforcement

The Nigerian government, with support from the UN, should prioritize enforcing child rights legislation, especially the Child Rights Act, across all states. This requires a cohesive legal framework that integrates both state and federal policies, ensuring consistency nationwide. Such enforcement would address gaps in protection and hold accountable those who violate girl child rights. Legal uniformity also empowers communities and local authorities to act in the best interest of the girl child, bridging policy and practice for effective change.

By implementing these recommendations, the UN and other stakeholders can work towards creating a more equitable and supportive environment for girl children in Nigeria, ultimately contributing to the realization of their rights and potential.

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