



Standpoint Epistemology to Problematicize the Notorious Term of Feminism in Pakistan

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Abstract: This study examines the lived experiences and challenges faced by feminist activists within Pakistan's deeply patriarchal culture. Drawing upon Dorothy Smith's standpoint epistemology as a theoretical guide, this study centers on women's situated knowledge as a legitimate source of uncovering social realities. Adopting a qualitative design, sixteen key feminists affiliated with organizations such as the Women Action Forum (WAF), Women Democratic Front (WDF), Aurat Foundation, Shirkat Gah, and Bedari were in-depth interviewed. Participants held positions as directors of NGOs, scholars, lawyers, and NGO workers in three major cities: Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad. The study examined the challenges, strategies, and resistance to feminist activism within Pakistan's sociopolitical context. Thematic analysis of transcribed interviews revealed that patriarchy begins operating from the private sphere of home, which is reinforced by social, cultural, and institutional mechanisms. This system regulates women's bodies, restricts their autonomy, and delegitimizes feminist claims by stigmatizing them as Western, elitist, and anti-Islamic. Despite legal reforms and policies for gender justice, entrenched social attitudes and a lack of public awareness continue to obstruct gender justice. Narratives of feminist activists in this study explain how feminists are creating counter-discursive spaces, such as Aurat Marches, to challenge patriarchal structures, assert bodily autonomy, and politicize the private sphere. Younger feminists are further decolonizing feminist knowledge by grounding their activism in local realities and raising awareness that is contextually relatable. The study affirms that progress toward gender justice depends on recognizing women as epistemic producers of knowledge and catalysts of transformation rather than assuming them to be silent victims of oppression.

Keywords: Feminism, Feminist Activism, Standpoint Epistemology, Patriarchy, Pakistan.

1. Introduction

Most of the research conducted on feminism in Pakistan highlights the historical struggles of feminist activism, particularly their resistance to anti-women state policies [17],[3]. However, in recent years, the feminist movement has undergone a significant shift; a new generation of feminists has broken their long-imposed silence surrounding personal and private matters, moving their focus from the socio-legal sphere of the state to the intimate realms of family, community, and society. This transition reflects an understanding that women's oppression and subjugation are deeply rooted in private spheres, where control over women's bodies and sexuality begins. By declaring "the private as political," these feminists challenged the broader political system that normalizes women's subjugation, consciously or unconsciously.

This new phase of the feminist movement in Pakistan provoked an intense backlash from men. Public discussion around women's bodies and sexuality was perceived as a violation of moral social boundaries. It led them to reassert their dominance through counter-mobilization, including online debates and anti-feminist marches [17],[21]. Feminist activism is discursively presented as shameless, imported, and westernized while excluding feminists from the moral social order [16]. The movement is often portrayed as being influenced by Western ideas and a threat to cultural norms that reflect patriarchal perspectives [1].

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Despite decades of activism, the situation of women's rights in Pakistan remains highly restricted. Authoritative people in positions of power are less inclined to act against deep-rooted patriarchal practices such as forced marriages, honor killings, rapes, forced religious conversions, dowry deaths, acid attacks, and child marriages. These forms of oppression are reinforced through complex cultural and socio-political structures that continue to marginalize and silence women's voices. Because of this situation, feminist activists and women's organizations must continually raise awareness and mobilize others to take collective action to secure women's rights and help them live lives free from violence and fear [4].

In view of a clear gap in research, this research contributes to the concept of considering the standpoint and perspectives of those whose lived experiences in a particular social context should be considered epistemic privilege. Research is aimed at producing knowledge that is woman-centered. Dorothy Smith's standpoint epistemology [20],[11] offers a valuable methodological strategy for presenting knowledge that is not distorted by male-centered narratives. This aspect is vital in a country like Pakistan, where societal norms dictate the boundaries of women's knowledge and existence. This paper aims to analyze and present how the situated knowledge of feminist activists can contribute to a deeper understanding of feminism, which in turn supports women's empowerment and challenges established patriarchal norms.

2. Literature Review

A growing body of scholars has researched the evolution of the feminist movement in Pakistan, providing a historical overview of this activism. The feminist movement can be traced back to the Pakistan Movement, which provided Indian Muslim women with the opportunity to fight together for independence and laid the groundwork for their political and socioeconomic emancipation [12],[15],[17]. In the early years following independence, feminist activists mobilized against anti-women policies regarding marriage, divorce, maintenance, and custody of children.

During General Zia Ul Haq's regime, these feminist movements and organizations marked a turning point in Pakistan's feminist history. Policies implemented during his period restricted women to households. He implemented the hudood ordinances, which were not only meant to reinforce patriarchal control over women's bodies and sexuality but also provided men with legal protection to practice violence against women [3],[12],[15],[17]. In response, women's organizations played a crucial role in the 1980s, launching movements to challenge systemic injustice and bringing women's issues into the public and political spheres [3], [12],[15], [17].

A thorough review of existing literature reveals that the role of Pakistani feminists for women's rights is devalued, marginalized, and often silenced by patriarchal narratives. In Pakistan, women and non-masculine voices have always been excluded to preserve the privileges of men. Colonial structures further reinforced this hierarchy by favoring heterosexual men over non-binary persons, women, and others. This created a patriarchal fabric that continues to regulate women's bodies and sexuality under male authority, both at the household and public levels. This system legitimizes freedom and mobility for men despite being incriminated in harassment and assault, while constraining women's freedom under male supervision. Women are thus subject to the "good women, bad women dichotomy," where obedience to moral norms defines them as respectful and disagreement is stigmatized as immoral and rebellious [17],[23],[24].

In recent years, feminist activism has created discursive platforms, notably the "Aurat Marches," to shatter the long-imposed silence and speak about women's oppression, bodily autonomy, and gender politics. This movement directly challenged the entrenched patriarchal order and provoked intense backlash from male political figures, media spokespeople, and religious clerics. Public debate extended beyond feminist activists to include male authors and journalists who sought to justify patriarchal norms and stigmatize feminism as elitist, Western, or anti-Islamic [18],[21]. Political and religious male figures portrayed feminism as contextually irrelevant. Perspectives of feminists regarding women's rights debates from their own lived experiences were dismissed through men-centered views and hegemony. They even organized counter marches called "Mard Marches" to create anti-feminist discourses. Through all these efforts, feminist voices are filtered, manipulated, and delegitimized within patriarchal discursive frameworks.



Using positioning theory, Sadaf and Siitonen (2022) [16] demonstrated how men's discourses around women's marches dominate social media platforms, reinforcing patriarchal dominance, power, and agency to re-frame feminism as anti-Islamic, Western, and shameless. Similarly, in 2021, Akram and Sajjad conducted a study employing Harding's standpoint theory to reveal the marginalization of feminist perspectives within Pakistan's academic landscape. Their study found that only 1.16% of publications in political science and international relations address feminist issues, indicating that feminist voices are not only excluded from public discourse but also from the production of academic knowledge [2].

To summarize, although feminism in Pakistan has earned considerable scholarly attention, a significant research gap remains. There is an immediate need to include feminists lived experiences in the production of knowledge, which can elaborate on their narratives and include their voices as epistemic privileges to challenge patriarchal structures and strengthen feminist epistemology.

3. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to collect data, aiming for an in-depth understanding of feminist perspectives based on participants' lived experiences and situated knowledge. Employing Dorothy Smith's (1987) [19] methodological framework, this research focuses on considering women's standpoints to produce knowledge based on their day-to-day lived realities.

For in-depth data collection, a semi-structured interview design was employed to record participants' views and interpretations based on their own experiences and challenges as feminist activists. A total of sixteen feminists from various organizations, including the Women Action Forum (WAF), Women's Democratic Front (WDF), Aurat Foundation, Bedari, and Shirkat Gah, were selected. Participants were selected using non-probability sampling techniques, which combined snowball and purposive sampling methods to identify individuals who were actively engaged in the feminist movement and had experience advocating for women's empowerment.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure thematic consistency while allowing participants to express everything worth mentioning and important to them. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) [5]. This analytical approach allowed us to identify key patterns and discourses that emerged from data obtained from participants. Centered on feminist voices, this study aims to produce knowledge that explains the actual contributions and challenges of feminist activism in Pakistan.

4. Results and Discussion

This study revealed important insights into the experiences of feminists advocating for women's rights within organizations such as the Women's Action Forum (WAF), Women's Democratic Forum (WDF), Aurat Foundation, Shirkat Gah, and Bedari. Drawing upon Dorothy Smith's standpoint epistemology, it was ensured that the situated knowledge of feminists was included as an epistemic resource [8],[11],[20]. Following themes derived from the data, elaborate on how gendered power relations operate across both private and public spheres in Pakistan, and how feminists experience, interpret, and resist these hierarchical structures.

5. Patriarchy in the Private Sphere

Most of the feminists were of the view that the home is the primary site of patriarchal control, where domestic chores and caregiving responsibilities are considered inherently feminine responsibilities. At the same time, men are the decision-makers within the household. Respondents highlighted that male authorities in the household closely monitor women's actions, leaving them with limited freedom to think, decide, or take any action according to their own desires and ambitions. Physical, emotional, and economic violence is used to ensure that women perform their duties efficiently and are not discordant with the order endorsed by male figures in the home. Karachi-based young feminist described family as the "basic residence of patriarchy," explaining that it controls and suppresses women, regulates women's behaviors, and socializes them to fit into submissive gender roles.

As she stated:

"We start experiencing injustice and inequality in our own families, where the rights of men are served through the exploitation of women."

A senior member of WAF drew attention to the unequal division of labor in the rural areas of Pakistan, where women work in the fields, bring water for the household, and cut grass for goats; care work is an extension, but their work remains invisible despite its economic significance.

She insisted:

"Pakistan mein aurat apni jaan maar rahi hain." (Women are working extremely hard, often at the cost of their own well-being)

This narrative presents a feminist analysis that locates the origin of gender inequality in the private sphere, where everyday power relations are at play.

6. Gendered Burden and Economic Inequality

Respondents highlighted the burden of dual responsibilities that women face when engaging in both economic work and domestic responsibilities. The domestic burden remains the sole responsibility of the female gender, even though they are involved in paid work almost equally to their male partners. This dual work not only limits their economic growth but also leaves them psychologically and physically drained.

As a senior feminist engaged with Shirkat Gah, I highlighted how women's unpaid economic contributions in rural areas sustain the patriarchal economy.

She stated:

"Even if she engages in cultivation and harvesting, it is all considered part of domestic chores – unpaid and worthless."

Women lack autonomy over economic matters. Even if they are doing paid work, they are not the ones who decide where to spend their money. As one respondent argued, men can sell goats and bulls and spend money anywhere they want. Whereas women "do not have any say in anything." These findings resonate with Dorothy Smith's (1997) [19],[20] concept, "the relation of the ruling," which explains how patriarchal practices and male dominance in institutional and economic systems are supported through everyday gendered practices.

7. Social Construction of Sexuality and Gender Roles

Many respondents highlighted that, though there are some biological differences, society has constructed so much in terms of gender roles and inequality that is reinforced through religion, culture, tradition, and public discourses, as one activist summarized:

"Women are born different biologically, but society has constructed so much around it to discriminate against them."

Another respondent argued that Pakistani society is "gender blind." Most people lack awareness about the power dynamics that function to support patriarchal structures. If any man supports gender justice, he will face ridicule through terms like "Joru ka Ghulam" (Wife's servant). This indicates how women's behavior and men's divergence are controlled to sustain masculine dominance.

Most of the feminists are of the view that gender roles, sexual harassment, moral order, and the "good women, bad women dichotomy" are used as tools to maintain patriarchal order, as an Islamabad-based activist explained sarcastically:

"Patriarchy resides in every home that controls women's dangerous bodies, which may spread vulgarity or go insane in the case of freedom and free will."



Such statements align closely with feminist scholarship on heterosexuality and the politics of gender and respectability.

8. Feminist awareness and decolonization

Feminists interpret feminism as a necessity for Pakistani society that is unjust and oppressive to women. They reject the perception of feminism as an import and insist on the importance of the movement as a moral and political obligation to get women their rights to justice and equality, as one of the activists engaged with WAF expressed her interpretation of the situation of gender injustice in Pakistan as:

"Men have accepted women working outside, but they are not ready to give up their privilege to sit and be served by women. They are not ready to share their burden, and this is where the fight begins. Women are often identified by their relationships, such as 'mothers, wives, and daughters,' whereas men are typically identified as individuals. Women have glorified terms that demand extra responsibilities.

"If a woman sacrifices, keep patience; she will be a good woman, but if she speaks up for her rights, she becomes a bad woman."

Many respondents argued that not only feminists but also women outside formal organizations, who are often uneducated and live at home, resist inequality in their day-to-day lives. Feminist awareness and consciousness are reflected in everyday experiences that resonate with Smith's (1997) [19] concept, which is "starting from women's lives." As one respondent argued:

"Feminists are not aliens; they are like every other woman fighting for her rights. Even uneducated women sitting at home fight for their rights in their everyday lives."

Respondents rejected the perception of feminism as "elitist and a western import"; they asserted that the global feminist movement intersects with local cultural, religious, and political realities, thus necessitating the contextualization and decolonization of feminism. They highlighted the resistance of women facing oppression and injustice in day-to-day life. This discourse aligns with Grab's (2023) [9] concept of including marginalized and indigenous voices to decolonize epistemic knowledge. Findings affirm that feminism in Pakistan is a contextually grounded practice of resistance against gendered injustice. This represents a collective feminist consciousness aimed at challenging established patriarchal norms.

9. Sexual and bodily autonomy

In recent years, feminist activists have been setting a new trend to raise their voices about sexual and bodily autonomy, provoking severe public reaction. When feminist activists were asked about the need for such demands. Most of the respondents emphasized that "the cost of being silent is too high." As per their narratives, male sexual dominance and control over women's bodies are entrenched in the domestic sphere, where women are disciplined to remain under moral boundaries. Women face harassment and sexually abusive behavior at workplaces and in public places, which further restricts their mobility and agency. A Lahore-based activist engaged with Shirkat Gah explained:

"The workplace harassment policy is updated, and now even freelancers, online agents, and students are protected under this policy. That is very important because so many women could not report harassment. However, the law alone is insufficient to control it. The underlying cause is that they are sexualized and stigmatized as less intellectual and less human. So, feminist activists started raising those concerns for awareness and public attention."

She pointed towards the case where hundreds of unidentified men assaulted and mistreated a young woman TikTok for visiting her fans at Minar-e-Pakistan and making TikTok videos [7].

"People questioned why she even went there, immediately assuming her to be immoral or of bad character. In reality, she had invited her followers to attend an event where she planned to sing, interact with fans, and make

TikTok videos. She did not call anyone to assault her. When men do such things, it is seen as just entertainment, but when women do it, their actions are sexualized. Critiques focused on her clothing, saying her shirt was short or her head was uncovered, as if that justified the violence she faced. Many women face similar incidents but stay silent out of fear of being interrogated and blamed."

Slogans about body and sexuality, such as "Mera Jisam meri marzi" (My body, my choice), emerged from the lived experiences and difficulties of women in Pakistan, as a senior representative of Bedari explained:

"Women raised this slogan because society sexualizes women's bodies. Everyone has the right to their body. If men say they have a right over their bodies, it is just normal, but when women do the same, they are accused of promoting vulgarity. Someone in the Aurat March wrote: 'Keep your dick pic to yourself.' Many of us have experienced incidents such as receiving nude images on social media or encountering men exposing themselves in public places. When women raise such issues, they are condemned, but men's inappropriate behavior often goes unquestioned."

The slogans, which were exaggerated by the media and misinterpreted by patriarchal spokesmen, were "Mera Jisam meri marzi," "Apni dick pic apnay pass rakho," "Lo beth gai men theek say" [21]. Feminists assert that these messages are to claim women's custody over their bodies and to discourage sexual objectification. They are not asking for immorality but for safety, dignity, and equal rights.

10. Personal is Political

A feminist concept known as the personal is political [10] holds that political structures and gender power relations directly shape women's personal experiences of violence, control, and subjugation. As a senior member of Bedari articulated:

"The spirit of women's rights protests has always been political. "Mera jisam meri marzi" is not a personal slogan; it is a political one. "Khana khud garam kar lo" is about gender roles that are promoted for structural reasons. Women of the older generation were reluctant to speak about these matters, but feminists of the new generation are bold enough to openly express their realities.

Likewise, a Karachi-based feminist activist and research scholar indicated how personal experiences correlate with systemic structural inequalities.

"When you realize that what is happening to you is also happening to others, you begin to understand that these experiences are not accidental. The personnel are actually political; there are structural and systemic reasons behind such wrongdoings."

These narratives affirm that the private sphere is deeply political. The restrictions on women's freedom of speech (do not talk too much or too loudly), mobility (do not go out into public spaces), and body (do not sit with your legs open wide, do not walk that way) reflect the minute regulation of their sexualized bodies and violate many of their fundamental rights [18]. One banner, which elicited a strong conservative reaction, read: lo baith gai, theek se (behold, I am sitting properly), to mock the social command for women to sit correctly and to hit upon the public-private binary that reinforces patriarchal control.

Unlike earlier feminists who fought against legal and public inequalities, contemporary feminism rejects the false boundary between personal and political life. It highlights how family, religion, and culture shape patriarchal structures. While earlier feminists focused on the public and politico-legal spheres, fourth-wave feminism aims to deconstruct the false public-private binary imposed by patriarchy, which divides production and reproduction into distinct spheres [13],[18].

11. Feminist perspectives on pro-women policies

Most respondents argued that, in Pakistan, the policy framework appears secure, as numerous pro-women legislative reforms have been introduced. However, implementation remains unaddressed, and thus it requires urgent attention. This gap between policy and implementation reflects patriarchal norms that support structural and cultural barriers. Feminists are concerned with promoting social awareness and readiness to



accept women's rights for the effective execution of legal provisions, as the senior representative of the Aurat Foundation explained:

"Policies may exist in documents, but they are not enough without a broader societal shift towards a positive perspective on women's rights. The real challenge lies in implementing pro-women policies. Most people are unaware of what the law actually states, and this lack of awareness leads to continued deprivation."

She demonstrated that although policies such as the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act were passed in 2015, domestic violence is still persistent because patriarchal values are supported by society. Awareness about legal protection is minimal. Similarly, cultural practices persist in violating women's legal rights to own property. She insisted, "Policies are there, but we must take measures to ensure their implementation."

Another feminist from Islamabad engaged with WDF, emphasizing that legal reforms must accompany social transformation. She reflected:

"We are least concerned about existing acts and policies. Women have historically protested for policy matters during periods of social and political urgency. Although legal protections for women exist, patriarchal attitudes continue to obstruct their effective implementation. Women are socialized to adjust and endure unjust societal structures, which further reinforces their barriers."

These perspectives align with Saigol's (2020) [3],[18] study, which suggests that the older generation of feminists was more engaged with the state through NGOs and advocacy. In contrast, younger activists are more engaged in promoting social awareness. However, both generations realize that changing mindsets is crucial to transforming laws into equal rights. For the same reason, contemporary feminists are holding up slogans that challenge negative attitudes and promote awareness about legal rights. These feminists are less engaged with the state and more focused on transforming social attitudes and cultural practices that are critical for translating laws into lived gender equality.

12. Feminism is an ongoing process of social change

In recent years, younger feminists have redirected their efforts toward raising social consciousness and initiating dialogues on sensitive topics related to gender justice, which sometimes provokes severe backlash. As Naffine (2002) [14] defines, open and sometimes unpleasant conversations are inevitable for feminism's progress and should be interpreted as an indication of the intellectual and social maturity of feminism as a school of thought, as a senior member of Bedari reflected optimistically.

"Ongoing debates and discourses can lead to positive consequences as prevailing myths are challenged; people are invited to recognize and analyze underlying realities. Even some men are beginning to acknowledge their role in gender discrimination and the need to contribute to change, which is a positive indicator of promising development."

Many respondents described feminism as an ongoing process of social change. Bold feminists, such as those who participated in the Aurat March, provoked anger but also drew public attention, raising awareness and fostering consciousness. As a Lahore-based activist optimistically remarked:

"These activities are bringing change at the level of conscience and awareness; even I am surprised that the Aurat March has become a national-level topic for discussion."

As Grab (2023) [9] describes, feminism is an ongoing process of social construction; local contexts and struggles continue to redefine its purpose. Most people think that feminists are "mindless" or "extreme" women, and women sometimes share this view. However, ongoing dialogues are gradually helping them recognize the legitimacy of feminist concerns. A representative of Bedari summarized this phenomenon:

"It is not possible that we can see change immediately; if we want to measure change, then we must compare our lives with those of our mothers and daughters; then we will see the difference."

Despite controversies surrounding it, Aurat March has emerged as a national-level topic of conversation about gender justice and equality. The active engagement of feminist activists with media and public debates indicates that, although gradual, social transformation is underway. As reflected in their narratives, dialogues, and social awareness, they are crucial for advancing feminism and fostering a more egalitarian and inclusive social order.

13. Discussion and Conclusion

This study concludes that feminist activists in Pakistan represent an epistemic knowledge that is context-specific and grounded in local struggles and lived experiences. Despite the establishment of pro-women legislative measures, implementation remains constrained because of the deep-rooted patriarchal structure reinforced by cultural norms and traditions. The narratives of feminists across Pakistan reveal that family is the initial point of women's oppression that regulates women's bodies, sexuality, and mobility. The patriarchal control that begins with the family extends into workplaces, public places, and media. Working women must bear the double burden of employment and household work, while social expectations of glorifying women's sacrifices and obedience keep legitimizing their suffering in day-to-day life.

While earlier feminists in Pakistan were engaged with the state to reform policies in accordance with the prevailing requirements, younger feminists have declared the "private as political". They are concerned with transforming cultural consciousness through various discursive spaces, including Aurat Marches, digital platforms, media negotiations, and public dialogues. This shift reflects feminist awareness and consciousness about the deep-rooted cultural norms and social attitudes that hinder the effective implementation of pro-women policies. Feminism is an ongoing process of social change that relies on continuous debate, cultural critique, and social awareness, challenging not only patriarchal structures but also inviting the public to engage in this transformative process.

This study is based on standpoint epistemology, which focuses on including the perspectives of feminists as epistemic resources. Through sharing their lived experiences and stories from the real world, feminists construct a knowledge system that situates feminism endogenously, while challenging the universalist and Western-centered models of feminism. Feminists in Pakistan are in an ongoing struggle to decolonize global feminist discourses by creating situated, relational, and locally grounded knowledge about the politics of gender. They not only challenge cultural norms but also reconstruct knowledge that is based on the lived realities, perspectives, and interpretations of feminist activists, advocating for a gender-inclusive and egalitarian society.

Centered on the voices of women, this study contributes to the evolving project of decentralizing feminism, declaring that women are not passive victims of suppression; they possess epistemic strength to produce knowledge, awareness, and consciousness that informs authorities and the public, driving trans-formational change and addressing gender inequality.

While this study explored the perspectives of feminists on broad concerns regarding gender injustice, future research could focus on more specific areas of feminist critique. For instance, authors could investigate feminist claims of public places in relation to women's safety and harassment, Women's experiences of sexual manipulation, objectification, and control, gender division of household labor, and concerns around pro-women policy implementation. These targeted studies could deepen the understanding of feminist struggles against structural inequalities embedded in everyday gendered experiences.

Overall, these insights provide an understanding of feminists as both producers of knowledge and "knowers" of situated experiences, underscoring their trans-formational potential in the context of structural inequalities.

14. Ethical Considerations

This study followed established ethical standards [6]. All participants were provided with information about the purpose of the research. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained. Keeping in mind the political and cultural sensitivity of the research, no personal identifiers were recorded. All participants were presented in terms of their affiliation with specific organizations and their role as activists in the feminist movement. This approach was adopted to secure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were given the right to withdraw at any stage and were allowed to decline answering any question that caused them



discomfort [22]. Respondents were not harmed in any form, and their dignity was fully respected throughout the study.

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Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethics approval and consent

Detailed information was provided about the nature and purpose of the study, and prior approval and consent were obtained from all participants.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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