

The Role of Malay Women in the Malaysian Workforce and its Impact on the Consciousness of Ethics and Integrity

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to share part of a postdoctoral research to examine the role of Malay women in the Malaysian workforce from 1970-2000 and analyze its impact on the young generations' consciousness on ethics and integrity. It will initially outline the socio-economic factors which have contributed to women's increasing participation in the Malaysian workforce, with a focus on Malay women. It will discuss the challenges of combining full time jobs with home obligations from Eastern and Islamic dimensions.

Design/methodology/approach: At the macro-level, library research is carried out through texts and on-line resources including journal publications of local authors. Secondary data have also been collected from Labour Force Survey Reports in Malaysia of the various years as well as Malaysia Plan Reports. Due to limited resources and data available from East Malaysia, this study will mostly include demographic figures from Peninsular Malaysia.

Findings: Malaysia has been experiencing a significant demographic change in workforce pattern with increasing participation of women since 1970s, much driven by industrialization policies and market demands within a competitive economic environment. Studies have shown that employers in Malaysia do not seem to be introducing change within their human resource policies and frameworks to support the continuous increasing trend of women's participation in a diverse workforce and dual career family pattern.

Practical implications: Considering these trends, it is doubly justified for the Malaysian government to take the lead, if employers are not sensitive to introduce change within their human resource policies and frameworks. An integrated collaborative effort between the Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family and Development and Ministry of Human Resources with representation from the employment sectors (i.e. both public and private) needs to be initiated urgently to address this pressing issue.

Originality/value: This paper will provide an insight for policy makers and employers to develop strategies to support women at work, as a way forward to balance market considerations within the society's requirements for nation building. Assessing the triple role of woman as a mother, home manager and career person from eastern culture and Islamic perspectives, this paper will recommend measures within the socio-economic and legal frameworks to support women at work.

Keywords: Consciousness, Ethics, Integrity, Value, Islam, Malaysia, Malays, Female Workforce.

Paper Type: Literature Review

1. Introduction

The world has become global with capitalistic features governing the modus operandi of human life. Information and communication technology has facilitated the reality of globalization. Commendable progress in information and communication technology (ICT) has made the concept of globalization, firstly introduced in the 1980s a reality (Mahathir, 2002). Globalization is no more a dream but a dream come true. However, human values and societal norms are undergoing dramatic changes in the past few decades. Despite nations' focus on

economic growth for prosperity and society's overall well being, the deterioration of ethical values has been glaringly seen, especially among the younger generation in developed as well as developing nations. Malaysia is no exception. While she has chartered commendable economic progress since independence within a diverse multi-cultural environment, the change in societal values and norms may pose a challenge to achieve her developed status by 2020, while striving to enhance the society's overall well being.

Following this background scenario, an ongoing doctoral study is currently undertaken to investigate the consciousness of the Malay community on ethics and value of integrity over a thirty year period from 1970 to 2000. The study, among others, will link the impacts of Malaysia's economic transformation from an agricultural to an industrial-based nation from an ethical dimension. It will identify and analyze the major discourses on ethics and integrity expressed in the Malay community, the largest ethnic group in Malaysia. The study will also examine the internal and external factors which may contribute to the changes in Malay ethics and integrity since the government's implementation of New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1970 till 1990, followed by National Development Policy (NDP) from 1991 to 2000 under the leadership of Prime Minister YAB Tun Mahathir Mohamad. The structures, pronouncements and implementation of the NEP, NDP and other related policies that follow will be examined in congruence within the context of ethics and integrity, a research area that has yet to be comprehensively and holistically investigated.

Research Objective

This particular paper will focus on the role of Malay women in the Malaysian workforce and its impact on nation building. It will highlight the challenges faced to balance their triple roles of a mother, home manager and career person within an eastern culture and Islamic environment. It will also discuss in general the implications of increasing participation of women in the Malaysian workforce. This paper will be part of a background chapter entitled Malaysia: Nation Building and Impact on Societal Values: 1970- 2000 in the overall research study. It will share part of the micro and macro studies to obtain background data and information for the overall study. This paper will provide some insights and implications for policy makers and employers to take constructive steps in an effort to balance market considerations with social requirements for nation building. This is pertinent for sustaining a civil society as Malaysia aspires to be a developed nation by 2020.

Methodology

At the macro-level, library research has been carried out especially through texts and on-line resources including journal publications of local authors. Secondary data have also been collected from Labour Force Survey Reports in Malaysia of the various years as well as Malaysia Plan Reports. Due to limited resources and data available from East Malaysia, this study will mostly include demographic figures from Peninsular Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

The Malaysian Malay community: ethics and integrity in background

The indigenous Malay community represents 63.1% of the total population of Peninsular Malaysia and 53.3% of the population of Malaysia with Islam as their main religion. The Malays respectively make up 50.1% of the total population of Malaysia (Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics Report, 2010). They therefore represent the majority of the nation's population and play diverse roles in the Malaysian community as students, parents, educators and professionals in both the private and public sectors. Some even drive local and global businesses as prosperous entrepreneurs in today's competitive environment. However, as an ethnic group, the Malay race has always been the poorest in Malaysia since the 1957 independence. Ethics and integrity of the Malay community remains an issue to be further investigated within a competitive and global environment. The social problems highlighted today in the media among the Malay ethnic group questions their worldview and consciousness on ethics and integrity, a universally accepted moral value, irrespective of religious differences.

Defining Ethics and Integrity

Ethics is derived from the Greek word, ethos which means the character, spirit and attitudes of a group of people or culture (Rahman, 2003). As a concept, it can be described as a set of principles that contains behavioural codes to determine what is right or wrong (Khalidah *et al.*, 2012a). It also outlines the moral duty and obligations that any human being should practice. According to Abdullah and Zainal Abidin (2011), ethics concerns itself with what is good or right in human interaction. It revolves around three central concepts: "self", "good", and "other." Ethics is also defined as a critical analysis of human acts to determine their rightness or wrongness in terms of two major criteria: truth and justice (Mauro *et al.*, 1999).

Therefore, in the study of ethics, one is trying to rationalize what actions are right or wrong and assess whether they are just or fair from different perspectives - individual, organizational or societal levels. To summarize from the writings of Hanafi and Hamid Salam in a book, *Islamic Principles of Business Organization and Management*, ethics may be defined as a model of behaviour that should be followed in order to harmonize human relationship and minimize abuse and work for the welfare of society (Faridi, 1997).

Integrity on the other hand is an ethical value, among many other human virtues. It is derived from a Latin word, *integri* (Stanwick and Stanwick, 2009). Integrity relates to honesty and goodness, wholeness and unity (Oxford, 2009). Merriam Webster (2010) defines it as “a firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values.” Danial (2008), a renowned Muslim motivator has associated Integrity with *Taqwa*, a value of the *Mukmins* (Nayal Rashed, 2007). *Taqwa* or piety is a comprehensive word found in Al Quran that carries the meaning of “god-consciousness”, fear, respect and reverence for God (Green, 2008). Khalidah *et al.* (2010) stated that, “a person of Integrity will consciously uphold his or her dignity, image and reputation before undertaking an action and always strives to do good deeds.

Factor Influencing Ethical Values

One of the challenges of the 21st Century is the character building of young generations and deteriorating moral values especially Generation Y, born between the year 1982-2000 (Khalidah *et al.*, 2010; Farnsworth and kliener, 2003; Freestone and Mitchell, 2004; Daily Express, 2009; Rusnah, 2005; VietNamNet, 2008; Srivasta, 2010; SnapComms, 2010; Munusamy *et al.*, 2010).

Several factors have no doubt influenced the shaping of one’s ethical values. They include upbringing, socialization process (i.e. the behaviour of surrounding people), experience and critical reflections on those experiences and the explicit and implicit standards of culture (Shaw, 2008). These factors may generally be referred as socio-cultural factors. In addition, they are also developed and internalized from religious teachings (Khalidah *et al.*, 2012b). All religions provide its believers with a worldview and strong composition of conduct, part of which involves moral instructions, values and commitments (Shaw, 2008).

Role of Parents in the Shaping Process

Parents have a primary role to ensure that good ethics is taught to their children. Shaw (2008) rightly emphasized that upbringing is the first critical factor influencing one’s ethical values. The pertinent role of parents in children’s upbringing has also been duly recognized in Islam based on a relevant Quranic verse, “O ye who believe! Save yourselves and your families from a Fire whose fuel is Men and Stones, over which are (appointed) angels stern (and) severe, who flinch not (from executing) the Commands they receive from Allah, but do (precisely) what they are commanded” (AlQuran, At-Tahriim 66:6). Parents’ role in upbringing a child is further emphasized by the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), ‘Every child is born on *Fitrat* (a natural inclination towards perfect and practical Islam). It is his parents who turn him towards Judaism, Christianity or fire-worship’ (Mishkat, 2014).

Women in the Malaysian Workforce

The influx of women into the workforce has been one of the dominant global social trends during the past thirty years (Noor Rahamah, 2012; Desjardin, 2009). This is also seen in Malaysia. Malaysia’s development planning since political independence in 1957 has emphasized steady economic growth, diversification of the economy, reduction of unemployment and improvement in income and wealth distribution (Jamilah, 1994). The implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) during the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-75) which continued until 1990 and replaced by the National Development Policy (1991- 2000) resulted in the nation achieving rapid economic development in the last three decades (1970-2000).

The major structural shift has been from the primary to the secondary sector especially in the manufacturing activities. Malaysian efforts in industrialization started with import substitution in the late 1950s and then switched to export-orientation in the late 1960s (Jamilah, 1994). The emphasis was on the development of resource-based and labour-intensive industries in which Malaysia had a comparative advantage. The labour-intensive industries were mainly textiles, garments, electronics, electrical products and food processing.

Table 1: Female Labour Force Participation rates by ethnicity in Peninsular Malaysia 1975-1990

Ethnic Group	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980

Malay	47.2	45.9	43.7	49.0	47.5	44.2
Chinese	47.6	46.6	45.7	49.0	47.8	44.2
Indians	46.9	45.9	48.4	50.1	50.4	50.4
Others	49.8	40.3	46.1	42.9	36.9	42.8
Total	47.3	46.1	44.9	49.1	47.8	44.8
Ethnic Group	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1990
Malay	43.0	43.4	44.0	43.0	43.4	45.8
Chinese	45.7	46.6	47.7	44.0	45.6	47.2
Indians	47.6	48.9	50.0	49.2	48.7	50.3
Others	39.7	39.5	32.7	33.9	40.8	50.5
Total	44.4	45.0	45.8	43.9	44.6	46.8

Source: Labour Force Surveys Report – various years

Table 1 has shown that the participation rates of the younger age groups among the women of the various ethnic groups were converging. Quoting from Pang Eng Fong (1980), “the convergence in racial participation rate suggests that the cultural and religious factors influencing labour force participation are declining in importance” and that labour market participation decisions are increasingly shaped by economic and educational factors” (Jamilah, 1994; Pang, 1980). This implies that Malaysian women, irrespective of ethnic and religious differences are driven by market demands to provide their labour services to the growing nation to generate economic growth.

Table 2: Labour Force Participation Rate by Sex and Age Group for Peninsular Malaysia

Year	1957	1970	1980	1985	1990
<i>Females</i>					
10-14	7.4	7.7	5.4	-	-
15-19	27.9	33.0	33.5	28.2	31.4
20-24	31.2	41.9	54.0	58.3	63.9
25-29	27.7	38.4	44.6	49.2	53.6
30-34	30.5	39.0	40.5	47.3	50.2
35-39	34.2	40.0	42.7	48.5	47.8
40-44	35.3	40.0	43.8	50.4	48.8
45-49	36.3	40.7	41.4	48.7	48.5

50-54	33.7	36.6	36.5	40.0	40.9
55-59	29.4	29.2	30.8	32.6	29.4
60-64	22.3	23.7	25.0	23.9	24.0
15-64	30.8	36.3	39.3	44.6	46.8
<i>Males</i>					
10-14	9.6	9.0	7.9	-	-
15-19	60.0	52.3	47.9	43.7	44.1
20-24	92.7	87.1	91.1	90.7	89.1
25-29	97.5	93.5	92.4	98.1	97.4
30-34	97.9	84.4	98.0	98.8	98.5
35-39	97.7	94.0	98.2	98.9	98.8
40-44	97.2	93.2	97.7	98.4	98.5
45-49	96.2	91.5	96.6	97.9	97.2
50-54	97.3	86.7	92.7	93.5	93.3
55-59	88.4	75.6	77.4	76.6	71.3
60-64	87.6	65.2	68.6	67.1	59.9
15-64	90.9	83.4	86.6	84.6	84.4

Source: Population and Housing Census data for 1957, 1970 and 1980,
For 1985 and 1990 from Labour Force Survey Report 1991

Referring to **Table 2**, there has been a dramatic change in the labour force participation rate (LFPR) pattern compared to that of men between the periods 1957 and 1980 (Jamilah, 1994). In 1957, there was a lower participation rate among women in the age 20-24. In 1980, age participation profile rose significantly as a whole but peaked at 20-24 age groups. In addition, it has consistently shown that LFPR among women is highest among females in the 20-24 years, 25-29 years and 30-34 years of age. These also signify the active child bearing periods for married couples and challenges that they have to bear to instill moral values and ethics in their children, while concurrently coping with their demanding jobs at the workplace.

Consequently, between 1970 and 1999, the number of women employed significantly rose from just under 0.9 million to 3 million. More women, especially Malays are continuously joining the Malaysian workforce alongside with economic development and urbanization. In 1999, women accounted for about 34.0 % of all employed workers (i.e. total labour force). In 2011, female participation in the total labour force in Malaysia was 35.97%, its highest value over the past 21 years. Their participation has consistently been highest in the 25 - 34 years age group. Official statistics also showed that the ratio of female to male labour force participation in Malaysia registered an increase from 44% in 1998 to 44.5% in 2000.

According to the Labour Force Survey Report in 2007, total labour force participation rate for Malaysia was 63.2% and the female to male ratio increased to 46.4%. In 2010, it further increased to 56.68%, the highest over the past 20 years (Labour Force Report, 2007). These figures clearly show that there is a continuous increase in the number of women in the Malaysian workforce. It also indicates their significant contribution to

the Malaysian economy as a human resource, pertinent for the production of goods and services, not by choice but by need to support the nation's economic growth.

"The growth in women's jobs in Malaysia has occurred in almost all sectors of employment and a small number of jobs seen as being traditionally feminine. The biggest increase in the number of women employed has been in the clerical and service jobs, while there have been a significant proportion of women with good educational qualifications moving into more senior positions. These jobs remain concentrated in public sector work such as teaching" (Noor Rahmah, 2012). What factors have contributed to this demographic shift of increasing participation of women in the Malaysian employment scenario?

Factors Contributing to the Increasing Participation of Women at the Workplace

Socio-economic factors, as mentioned, have, among others, contributed to this shift since 1970s. It all began when Malaysia decided to transform from an agricultural to an industrial nation. The Malaysian economic development process, export-oriented industrialization policies and an increase in the educational attainment of women since the 1970s have all contributed significantly to an emerging pattern of dual career families in employment. Foreign direct investment and the set up of manufacturing and electronic industries have further increased employment opportunities for women. The Malaysian culture has also been seen to shift somewhat, accepting the participation of women in employment, to improve the economic status and quality of life of family units although they are also expected to play an equally important role as a wife, mother and family manager at home.

In addition to socio-economic factors, political and legal factors have contributed to the increasing women's participation in the Malaysian workforce. The government has always been supportive in developing the female workforce through its educational, economic and human resource policies to support the economic growth agenda. With higher educational attainments, women competed with the males in technical and non-technical disciplines, covering all job scopes such as engineering, medicine, teaching, management, etc. The Employment Act 1955 in fact has been revised to include special provisions for employers to comply, to consider the welfare of women in employment. For example, women at work may now apply for maternity leave at 28 weeks of pregnancy. Women have also been given a legal right to enjoy 60 days of paid maternity leave and a further 90 days of extended unpaid leave to manage a newborn baby. As at 1st April, 2012, further provisions were included on sexual harassment matters to protect the dignity of women at work.

The government has even set up the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development to explicitly show the commitment and recognition of women's significant role in the Malaysian society, apart from addressing specific issues peculiar to women as a human right. While these developments may be seen to be a strength as well as opportunity to sustain continuous economic growth in Malaysia and respecting women's rights in an employment context, these developments have posed challenges from a social dimension.

Social Implications: Combining Full-time Work with Family Obligations

Without doubt, parents, as role models have the responsibility to nurture and instil ethics and integrity in their children (Khalidah *et al.*, 2012c). Women playing their roles as mothers in eastern cultures, not to mention in an Islamic environment, are seen as the first teachers to their children. But the issue is to what extent are working parents of today shaping their children effectively and adequately? With increasing dual career families and challenging workplace commitments, parents, especially mothers may pose problems to optimize their limited time to shape children. Socio-economic and demographic transformations taking place in Malaysia are showing increasing trends of women at work, implying that women is faced with scarcity of time to fully devote their heart and soul in the nurturing process.

A challenge of dual career family units, especially from a woman's viewpoint is combining full-time work with family obligations. Although it is already accepted as a common feature in today's capitalistic and materialistic global environment, combining full time work and family obligations is not an easy task. Before the 1970's, most women in Malaysia, especially the Malay Muslims were homemakers. It was a cultural norm, particular in the eastern society then, for women to stay at home and manage the family while husbands played the roles of bread winners. Women's role at home was seen to be noble, raising and nurturing children to be good citizens.

As more women enter the work force, they have to face the strains of maintaining their challenging triple roles - as wives, family managers and career women. In fact, while coping with these roles simultaneously, married working women have to highly depend on baby sitters, nurseries, family support or even foreign maids to manage the children and house works while they are at work. Very often, they will have to make sacrifices, be it at home or the workplace, although their husbands may contribute partly to doing house works or even giving a helping hand in childcare. It is not an easy job to balance working life with family life for women. In the eastern culture, no matter how successful they are in their careers, their roles as wives and family managers

continue to be equally important as their careers in the eyes of their life partners, not to mention from societal perspectives too.

In fact, today's social problems among the younger generation and increasing divorce cases especially among the Malays have been significantly contributed by dual career parents who fail to balance family life with career life. On several occasions, qualified women may have to sacrifice their careers for a better family life to reduce stress while trying to balance family life with work life. Some have personally declined promotion opportunities or in the worst scenario, they quit their jobs and find other options such as starting a home-based business which allows them to look after their children while performing work commitments as their own bosses. At least they do not have to face the challenges of being questioned by employers now and then when they have problems at home while managing children, etc.

Having said this, certainly, in order to support women at the workplace, employers must appreciate the "all in one" triple roles of women - an employee at work, a wife as well as a family manager at home. Unless employers are supportive enough to give moral support to women at work, the challenges of combining full-time work with family obligations will remain as a major challenge of today's career women who are striving to balance family life with work life. Perhaps, employers must treat women more as an end rather than as a means at work, much as they are paid salaries to perform certain job functions in the organization!

The following strategies or approaches may be adopted by employers to support women at work while adapting to the fast changing dual career family pattern in the global employment scenario:

1. *Flexible work arrangements* such as flexi-time, flexi-year, part-time work, job sharing, working from home arrangements as well as seasonal staff. These are not only applicable to women but men to support the dual career pattern in employment nowadays. Such flexible working arrangements will help the male and female employees to accommodate their changing family patterns and meet the psychological responsibilities associated with their children's education and well-being.
2. *Career planning including voluntary reduced time (V-time) and career break schemes.* Voluntary reduced time is a system that allows full-time employees to reduce working hours for a specified period with a reduction in salary. It differs from the usual concept of part-time work in that it is temporary, with a return to full-time job guaranteed. Career break scheme is another form of career planning. Many women prefer to spend more time with their infants than maternity leave allows.
3. *Childcare centres/services at the workplace.* Employers may invest in the setup of such centres/services in the spirit of ethics of care for their employees to ease the challenges of dual career parents in managing their small children while at work.
4. *Provision of training on work-life balance and counselling services.* Work-life balance programmes, practices and information can enable employees to balance work and personal lives in order to manage lifestyle and commitments, especially women, in performing their family responsibilities. Such programmes are also aimed at reducing and avoiding the negative impacts of their participation in employment nowadays. Employees will be in control of their working life which can lead to increased productivity, lower absenteeism, increased employees' morale and motivation and a happier less stressed workforce. Work-life balance programmes may be in the form of workshops or sharing sessions to give dual career parents the opportunity to discuss family related issues where appropriate to manage stress and revitalize emotional strength in coping with a challenging life. It may be organized specifically for women or for both genders at the same time.
5. *Provision of information services* such as childcare referral service and general advice on work-life balance and ways to manage stress. Mentoring initiatives may also be considered. This role would entail helping the female workers to meet colleagues, to better understand the organization's informal procedures and customs, and to acquaint her with any other peculiarities of work/corporate life.

While these strategies are options open for employers to support women at work, a survey was jointly conducted by Talent Corp and the Association of Certified Chartered Accountants (ACCA) on women and family issues in Malaysia and published in STAR newspaper (2013). The survey has significantly revealed that women have found it difficult to re-enter workforce after career break. Women who have taken a break are also perceived by employers to be less committed than employees who have never left service. In addition, they may also be penalized in terms of slower career progression and bypassed in favour of other candidates. Why is it hard for women to come back to work? Talent Corp CEO, Johan Mahmood Merican explains that this is largely due to lack of framework to assist these women back into the workforce and because many employers feel there is no need for such frameworks to be developed. They also do not see the need to change the existing system as it is

working adequately. However, 93% of the respondents have thought of returning to work and 63% have indicated their difficulty to join back service.

Why do women leave their jobs in the first place? About 65% respondents said that they have to raise a family, followed by complaints about lack of work-life balance (43%), while some wanted to care for a family member (38%). Other reasons include expensive child care (35%), lack of support facilities for women from employers (34%) and inflexible work arrangements (32%). Aptly, these are valid reasons based on Justice, Rights and Ethics of Care principles; what more from religious contexts, especially Islam.

It is perhaps timely for employers to seriously make efforts to support women wanting to make a comeback to work after doing good deeds for the family. It is also timely for employers to seriously develop a framework to support women at work as a social responsibility. Referring to the above survey again, 69% wanted support facilities for women and family which included child care centres, while 40% said competitive wages and benefits would keep women in employment.

Majority of the respondents also revealed that the current or former employees do not have a formal policy for flexible work arrangements or child care support facility. It is high time for companies to seriously develop a policy on flexible working arrangements and child care facilities to support the dual career family pattern in employment, a common feature in today's social system for the well being of the society at large.

While we are zealously discussing on employer's commitment and responsibilities to support women at work, what has the legal system provided to support female employees in Malaysia? The Employment Act 1955 (revised) provides 60 days of maternity leave, a maximum of five times throughout her employment service. Women are further eligible to 90 days of unpaid leave to be applied from the 61st day after maternity. Husbands are given 7 days of unrecorded leave when their wife delivers a newborn baby. Maternity leave for female workers in Malaysia is still short compared to developed nations. The law however has yet to cover provisions for flexible working arrangements, career breaks, re-entry and retainer schemes, etc to ensure women do not lose seniority when they return to work.

3. Conclusion

The Malays make up a majority of the population of Malaysia. They are also the main contributors of the labour force, instrumental in driving the nation's economic growth and prosperity. Considering the consistent increase in women's participation at work, particularly the Malay race, and its impact to nurture the consciousness of ethics and integrity among the younger generation, their role is of intrinsic value and inclusive to sustain an ethical generation of tomorrow.

Realizing this, more initiatives should be developed and implemented by employees to promote family-friendly initiatives at organizational level as a social responsibility. With the continuous increasing trend of women's participation in a diverse workforce and a dual career family pattern, it is doubly justified for the Malaysian government to take the lead, if employers are not sensitive to introduce change within their human resource policies and frameworks. Perhaps, an integrated collaborative effort between the Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family and Development and Ministry of Human Resources with representation from the employment sectors (i.e. both public and private) needs to be initiated urgently to address this pressing issue. A further revision of existing employment acts to include flexi-time, career-break, etc must be seriously examined within the competitive and challenging global employment scenario in an effort to intrinsically sustain ethics, defined by and large by a harmony of human relationship and minimize abuse and work for the welfare of society (Faridi, 1997); as a social responsibility.

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