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## **Unmet Needs of Female Inmates in the Nigerian Correctional Service and Advocacy for Conjugal Visits**

**ABSTRACT.** Globally, countries have continued to commit fiscal and policy attention to improving correctional facilities and the inmates' welfare. While the Nigeria's documented efforts through the 2019 Correctional Service Act is noteworthy, it has been observed that the physiological needs of inmates and welfare are still lacking, leading to delinquent behaviors among female inmates. The paper is aims at identify the unmet needs of female inmates in the Nigerian Correctional Service and assess how their rights to spousal conjugal visit can positively impact their character and self-fulfillments. The study adopted a desk qualitative methodology with published journals, selected case study, web-based sources and magazines. The social bond and strains theories were used as explanatory framework of analysis. Through the research, it was found that many documented dissident and outlaw behavior of female inmates are response to unmet needs to spousal love and emotional supports from family. It concludes that aside fiscal investment in security hardware measures to reduce crime and improving infrastructural facilities at correctional centres, strategic attention to the emotional and sexual needs of the inmates deserves urgent attention, to de-escalate insolent and aggressive behavior of the inmates. The

paper recommends for a review of the 2019 Nigerian Correctional Service Act to include the right of female inmates to spousal conjugal visit; inauguration of adhoc committee to under-study implementation strategy of female inmates' right to conjugal visits as legalised in other countries and infrastructural upgrade through ministry of interior to accommodate for spousal privacy and intimacy among others.

**KEYWORDS:** advocacy, correctional service, inmates, conjugal visit

## Introduction

The condition of female inmates in the Nigerian Correctional Service has gained increased attention over the last decade, with numerous studies shedding light on both improvements and persisting challenges (Ab-rifor et al., 2023). Aborisade & Fayemi (2016) stated that while convicted female inmates in Nigeria fare relatively well in terms of basic healthcare and nutrition compared to many low-income countries, several unmet needs continue to undermine their overall well-being and rehabilitation. One particularly under-addressed area is the lack of regulated provisions for conjugal visits, a basic human need that has long been recognised in several correctional systems across the globe (Sampaio, 2024; Van Hout, Klankwarth, & Stöver, 2025). This gap has several psychological and emotional implications, particularly for female inmates who are often primary caregivers and more socially dependent on family bonds for post-release reintegration.

Various research findings have showed that despite improvements in the provision of gender-sensitive facilities, female inmates in Nigeria still contend with several unmet emotional and psychosocial needs (Aborisade & Oni, 2021; Thanni, 2023; Urowoli, 2022). These include limited access to mental health support, insufficient vocational training, and most notably, the absence of opportunities for spousal intimacy. Studies by Nigerian criminologists and international organisations have indicated that this void not only affects marital stability but also contributes to rising instances of depression, sexual frustration, and maladaptive coping mechanisms among incarcerated women (Kajawo, 2021; Olawunmi, Ogunmefun, & Ai-wuyuse, 2022).

Conjugal visits are currently not permitted in the Nigerian correctional system, and this policy has disproportionately affected female inmates

(Olorunola et al., 2021). It is worthy of note that male inmates also suffer from the same restriction, but existing studies suggest that the psycho-social implications are more pronounced among females due to their differing emotional and relational needs (Abraham et al., 2024). In contrast, Hikmah et al. (2024) established that South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia have institutionalised conjugal visit schemes or pilot programmes, and recognised the rehabilitative and psychological importance of sustaining intimate spousal relationships during incarceration.

South Africa, in particular, has demonstrated a progressive stance by integrating conjugal visits into its correctional policy, with positive feedback from inmates and prison authorities alike (Agboola & Kang'ethe, 2024). The implementation of such policies has led to lower incidences of sexual violence and enhanced prisoner morale. Likewise, in countries like Brazil and Canada, studies have shown that conjugal visits contribute significantly to reducing recidivism and maintaining family cohesion, particularly for female inmates (Hikmah et al., 2024). Nigeria's continued neglect of this aspect places its correctional policies behind global trends.

The lack of intimate contact with spouses among Nigerian female inmates has been strongly linked to the emergence of homosexualist practices within correctional facilities, particularly in the southwestern states (Amali, Ngoveni, & Buthelezi, 2025). Reports from independent human rights organisations and investigative journalists established cases of unreported sexual activity between female inmates in facilities such as Kirikiri Female Prison (Lagos State), and Agodi Correctional Facility (Oyo State). While these practices are reportedly consensual, they stem from emotional deprivation and the absence of lawful sexual expression, which create a complex environment of vulnerability and coercion.

Although same-sex relationships remain a criminal offence in Nigeria under the same sex marriage (Prohibition) act of 2013. The perpetration of the relationship in a correctional environment raises moral and legal concerns as well as public health and human rights issues. Inmates in such circumstances are at increased risk of abuse, sexually transmitted infections, and psychological trauma, particularly when there is no institutional support or regulation. Advocating for conjugal visits for female inmates by their spouse or registered male partners is beyond fulfilling a sexual need, but a medium of acknowledging the importance of family bonds, emotional stability, and the right to maintain meaningful human relationships even within incarceration. The argument is not just a moral one but also a pub-

lic policy concern. Since correctional institutions are meant to rehabilitate, not to dehumanize, enabling regulated conjugal visits will play huge role in improving inmate behaviour, reduce aggression, and prepare inmates better for reintegration into family life post-release.

This paper considers it essential to elucidate the gendered dimension of incarceration. According to Aborisade & Fayemi (2016), women in Nigerian prisons are confronted with peculiar vulnerabilities, with the inclusion of sexual abuse, single motherhood, and economic marginalization. The lack of spousal contact adds another layer of isolation and abandonment, further weakening their support systems.

## **Literature Review**

### **Conjugal Visits: Classifications and Psychological Impacts on Female Inmates**

Conjugal visits, alternatively referred to as extended family visits, are structured private encounters permitted within correctional facilities, enabling inmates to spend quality time with their spouses or family members. These visits are typically designed to replicate normal family interactions, often including opportunities for sexual intimacy, emotional bonding, and private conversations. According to Burns et al. (2024), conjugal visits are an institutional arrangement that allows inmates to maintain interpersonal and familial relationships by engaging in private physical contact with their partners or spouses within designated facilities in prisons. This practice is rooted in the broader philosophy of rehabilitative justice, where maintaining family ties is seen as central to reintegration and behavioural reform.

There are various classifications of conjugal visits based on the nature of relationships recognised and the purpose served. Broadly, these visits may be categorised into spousal conjugal visits, familial visits, and same-sex partner visits in jurisdictions where such partnerships are legally recognised. Spousal conjugal visits are the most common, where the legal or common-law spouse is allowed to visit the inmate in a private setting (Nisa, 2024). Familial conjugal visits include children, parents, or siblings, and are designed more for emotional bonding than for sexual intimacy. In contrast, Otsu (2024) posited that jurisdictions with progressive human rights frameworks have recently expanded access to same-sex partners to reflect evolving definitions of family.

The duration of conjugal visits varies significantly by jurisdiction and institutional policy. In the United States, where conjugal visits are most notably practiced, visits often range between 6 to 72 hours, depending on the inmate's behaviour, security level, and institutional resources (Van Hout, Klankwarth & Stöver, 2025). The state of California allows extended family visits lasting up to 72 hours, held in private housing units within the prison grounds. In Canada, Paynter & Heggie (2025) emphasised that visits under the "Private Family Visit" programme sometimes last up to 72 hours every two months for eligible inmates. However, in many African countries, including Nigeria, such programmes are largely non-existent or not reckoned with due to legal, cultural, logistical, and institutional challenges (Olorunmola et al., 2023).

Raj (2025) emphasised that the fundamental essence of conjugal visits is entrenched in the recognition of the right to family life, as enshrined in various human rights instruments such as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules). These visits help in rejigging the familial bond, which is a motivational anchor for inmates. For female inmates, conjugal visits provide an avenue to sustain their identities as partners, mothers, and family members, mitigating the erosion of these roles while in prison (Otsu, 2024). This connection to family and the outside world has the tendency to instill a sense of hope, and reduce institutional alienation and psychological distress.

### **Benefits of Conjugal Visits for Female Inmates**

The psychological benefits of conjugal visits for female inmates are diverse. First, the visits alleviate feelings of loneliness, abandonment, and emotional deprivation. Emotions are intensified in female correctional populations due to their generally higher emotional sensitivity and family-oriented identities (Nisa, 2024). Nayyab, Khan & Khan (2025) stated that reconnecting with loved ones through physical intimacy and emotional interaction helps reduce anxiety, depression, and trauma-related symptoms that are prevalent among female inmates.

Moreover, conjugal visits promote emotional stability and behavioural self-regulation. Studies have shown that inmates who regularly receive conjugal visits are less prone to aggressive outbursts, self-harm, and violations of institutional rules (Ang, Saat & Shittu, 2025). This is because

such visits provide an outlet for emotional expression and reduce pent-up frustration. For women that enter prison with histories of abuse and emotional instability, these interactions offer therapeutic relief, nurturing psychological balance.

Also, adaptation to correctional lifestyles and ethos becomes relatively more manageable when inmates maintain ties to their support systems (Umeh, 2025). Conjugal visits serve as motivational incentives for female inmates to comply with institutional rules and participate in rehabilitation programmes (Burns et al., 2024). The anticipation of reuniting with loved ones has the tendency to serve as a behavioural regulator, and reinforce a sense of accountability and purpose amidst the dehumanising nature of prison life in Nigeria.

Importantly, these visits further have positive effects on maternal identity and parenting roles. For incarcerated mothers, maintaining emotional bonds with their children and partners contributes to a more positive self-image and reduces the stigma associated with imprisonment (Schmidt, Turney, & Monreal, 2024). The opportunity to perform maternal or spousal roles, even within prison constraints, reinforces inmates' sense of self-worth and reduces the likelihood of post-release family breakdown.

From a psychological standpoint, conjugal visits contribute to inmates' mental health by preserving their sense of autonomy and agency. Within the correctional environment, where routines and behaviours are rigidly controlled, the opportunity to exercise choice, intimacy, and private interaction fosters personal empowerment and psychological resilience (Leech et al., 2024). For women, this has counteracted feelings of institutional helplessness and emotional suppression.

There is also a correlation between conjugal visits and lower recidivism rates. Inmates who maintain strong family connections are statistically less likely to reoffend upon release. Conjugal visits reinforce the social bonds theory of criminology, which posits that strong attachments to pro-social institutions and relationships reduce the likelihood of criminal behaviour (Adenuga et al., 2024). Thus, the reinforcement of bonds during incarceration for female inmates who often emerge from socio-economically fragile backgrounds, makes the visits serve both rehabilitative and preventive purposes. It is pertinent to note that despite the numerous benefits of implementing conjugal visits, the idea is still mired in controversy and inequality. This is because it can be conceived as being logistically demanding, susceptible to abuse, and potentially unfair if access is restricted to only married inmates.

## Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on social bond and strain theory as its explanatory framework to analysing disorderly behavior of inmates in correctional service, particularly the female inmates in correctional services. The social bond theory was propounded by Hirschi & Gottfredson (2018). The theory has also grown to be described as a “control theory” because of the control measures it exalt on individuals and group behavior. The central assumption of the theory thesis is that respect for social relations, acceptable norms and the bond of affections which exists between individuals and among groups helps to remodel and reconfigure individuals from possible deviant character and crime potentiality. The theory assumed that a deep affection of social relations and emotional attachment limits propensity of individual wiliness to commit crime. It further stressed that existing intimacy in social or family relations strengthens individual aversion to criminal and other outlawed behaviors.

Paez & Robinson (2025) in a further development Hirschi’s social bond theory posits that individuals are restrained from engaging in deviant behaviour through their attachments, commitments, involvements, and belief in societal norms. The social bond theory assumes that the stronger the bonds with family, partners, and community, the less likely an individual is to engage in antisocial or non-conforming acts (Mensah, 2025). In the correctional context, especially for female inmates, conjugal visits serve as a mechanism for maintaining these social bonds, reducing feelings of abandonment, and reinforcing normative behavior in the post-correctional experience. Within this framework, conjugal visits are not merely physical but symbolic of an enduring relationship with pro-social structures.

Adaptation of the social bond theory to female inmates in Nigeria suggests that when women are permitted conjugal visits, their emotional and relational bonds are preserved, which contributes to better psychological adjustment and behavioural regulation in prison. Aborisade & Oni (2021) established that Nigerian prisons are characterised by overcrowding, limited psychological support, and high emotional deprivation. In this context, the facilitation of conjugal visits has the capacity to serve as a behavioural incentive, to anchor inmates to a sense of belonging and purpose, and thus promote conformity to prison rules and participation in rehabilitation programmes. With the reform of the Nigeria’s prison act, which seek to positively correct the behavioural pattern of the inmates in the post- pris-

on experience, allowing the rights of the female inmates to conjugal needs will help to regulate their behavior positively as inmates and also prepare them for proper integration into the society within the realm of civility.

Conversely, Merton's strain theory focuses on the structural imbalances in society that create pressure on individuals to deviate when legitimate means of achieving socially acceptable goals are blocked (Merton, 1968). The theory argued that individual unmet needs create psychological, emotional and physical strains, which eventually narrow human minds to illegality for survival and self-actualisation. The theory has become the flashpoint of research in sociology and criminology. The adaptation of the theory to the correctional environment is suitable, especially for women in African societies who are often defined through their roles as wives and mothers, the denial of conjugal access leads to frustration, emotional imbalance, and potential deviance. Merton's theory assumes that when institutional structures (such as correctional institutions) fail to accommodate human needs and aspirations, inmates have the tendency to engage in resistance, withdrawal, or behavioural disruptions.

Within the Nigerian correctional service, where female inmates have no access to emotional and physical outlets, strain theory explains the potential psychological distress, rebellion against institutional regulations, and withdrawal from rehabilitation activities. This explains why many inmates from correctional facilities in Nigeria find it difficult to live happily and law abiding in the society after the post-correctional experience. However, when conjugal visits are introduced, this strain will be mitigated, and this will provide an alternative route to meet emotional and psychological needs through legitimate, structured channels. Thus, conjugal visits act as institutional adaptations to reduce psychological strain, thereby promoting stability.

It is important to note that while social bond theory flags the role of relationships in deterring deviant behaviour and enhancing rehabilitation, strain theory captures the institutional pressures and emotional consequences of deprivation. In the Nigerian context, where female inmates often come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and already face social exclusion, conjugal visits serve as both a preventive and corrective tool. It reinforces social ties as indicated by Hirschi and relieves institutional strain as expressed by Merton, and this altogether brings about more psychologically balanced and compliant behavior among inmates.

In the closing, a closer analytic metrics of the two theory's claims on human behaviors can be re-evaluated and questioned. For instance, while

the social bond theory hinges on how emotional connectivity with friends and family, mutual respectful social relations and normative characters dissuade people from criminality, the theory could not explain why individuals who have enjoyed love, affection with equal emotional attachment with their family have equally grown to become perpetual outlaw. As argued by Oyekanmi (2014) individual's position of affluence and the opulent background usually embolden those becoming deserters and disgruntled to enabling laws. For these individuals, the love from the family and certain quarters in the society is treated as immunity from answering for their crime. Secondly, the social strains theory which explained individual's dissident behavior and spiral growth in crime as a consequent of dysfunctional society which could not meet their needs many not encompassing. Given the reality that human wants are insatiable, the attainment of one layer of human needs lead to other needs. Thus, the theory did not capture possible remedial or therapeutic measures to manage human psychological and emotional reaction to unmet needs and expectations from investing their minds to criminal behaviors.

### **Comparative analysis of Conjugal Visits implications on Female Inmates**

Empirical observations from other countries prove the positive correlation between conjugal visits and inmate behaviour (Vladu et al., 2021). Kajawo (2021) established that in South Africa, the department of correctional services permits family and conjugal visits under certain conditions, particularly for married inmates, as part of its effort to strengthen family ties and reduce recidivism. The South African model is informed by a human rights-based approach to incarceration. This aligns with both Hirschi's and Merton's theoretical frameworks by reinforcing social cohesion and reducing deprivation. Meanwhile in Ethiopia, where the correctional infrastructure is perceived as less developed, there are reported instances where married female inmates are allowed supervised visits with their husbands (Aleminch, Abegaz & Alemu, 2022). These visits, though limited, are seen as part of efforts to align penal practices with traditional family values, a vital cultural consideration in understanding female inmates' behaviour. The allowance of conjugal visits in such contexts have reportedly led to improved emotional well-being and reduced institutional conflict (Arua et al., 2024), which further corroborates both theoretical assumptions.

Beyond Africa, countries such as Canada, Mexico, and Germany demonstrate more institutionalised approaches to conjugal visitation (Schmidt, Turney & Monreal, 2024). In Canada, the Correctional Service's "Private Family Visit" programme (PFV model) allows eligible inmates, including women, to spend up to 72 hours with partners and children in home-like units (Knudsen, 2025). Studies show that this significantly enhances inmates' sense of dignity and self-worth, aligning with Hirschi's notion of attachment and Merton's concept of strain alleviation (Paynter & Heggie, 2025). From the foregoing, the PFV model particularly benefits female inmates who are mothers, and helps them sustain family roles and emotional health.

Hikmah et al. (2024) established that conjugal visits are broadly permitted across correctional facilities for female inmates in Mexico. These visits are viewed as rights rather than privileges and form part of the country's rehabilitative correctional policy. Research indicates that these visits help reduce incidents of violence and depression among female inmates, further corroborating the applicability of both theories in explaining inmate adaptation and emotional stability (Bell, 2024; Massa & Fondevila, 2025). Hikmah et al. (2024) stated that in Germany, the correctional system emphasises reintegration and human dignity, with conjugal visits encouraged as part of normalising inmates' social behaviour. Female inmates are allowed private visits with their partners in designated family rooms. This practice reinforces familial roles and has been shown to enhance post-release reintegration. Germany's approach validates Hirschi's theory of social bonds and supports Merton's view of institutionally sanctioned mechanisms to mitigate strain and prevent maladjustment.

Considering the Nigerian correctional service, these global examples and theoretical perspectives provide the flash point of policy gaps. Presently, Arua et al. (2024) established that conjugal visits are largely absent or inconsistently implemented across Nigerian prisons, particularly for female inmates. Despite the transformative potential, societal taboos, infrastructural limitations, and administrative reluctance hinder the adoption of conjugal visitation programmes. However, with the consideration of the triangulation of the social bond and strain theories, it is evident that implementing structured conjugal visits has the capacity to improve behavioural outcomes, reduce psychological distress, and facilitate better adaptation to the correctional environment among female inmates.

From the foregoing, both Hirschi's and Merton's theoretical assumptions provide an overwhelming theoretical foundation for the understand-

ing of how conjugal visits can influence female inmates' behaviour. In the Nigerian context, the theories offer insights into how such programmes will eventually mitigate the harshness of incarceration, support inmates' mental health, and promote institutional stability. Learning from international practices, especially from the template of South Africa and Ethiopia, there is a clear need for policy reform in Nigeria to accommodate gender-responsive correctional strategies that recognise the rehabilitative value of conjugal visits.

### **Female Inmates' Needs and the Consequences of Denied Intimacy in Nigerian Contexts**

The correctional experience for female inmates is often shaped by distinct psychological, emotional, and social needs, many of which differ significantly from those of their male counterparts. Previous studies have consistently emphasized the peculiar needs of incarcerated women, including access to healthcare, maternal support, education, and perhaps most profoundly, the need for emotional intimacy and sexual interaction with their lawful partners. According to Agboola & Kang'ethe (2024), the incarceration of women disrupts their social roles and deep personal relationships, and this creates a vacuum that result in psychological instability. In contexts where conjugal visits are not permitted, such as in many Nigerian prisons, this deprivation is particularly severe.

Several studies have reinforced the importance of conjugal visits as a means of fulfilling emotional and sexual needs for incarcerated women. In countries like Canada, Mexico, Germany, South Africa, and Ethiopia, female inmates are granted controlled access to partners through conjugal or private family visit programmes (Alemineh, Abegaz & Alemu, 2022). These countries recognise the psychosocial importance of such interactions, not only as a basic human right but also as a stabilising and rehabilitative tool. The South African Department of correctional services permits family visits, including intimate encounters, particularly for married inmates, on the basis that maintaining strong family bonds contributes significantly to inmates' well-being and post-release reintegration (Masekoameng, Parry & Fourie, 2025).

In Ethiopia, although the correctional system is underdeveloped, there are provisions albeit inconsistent for female inmates to meet with their spouses. Reports from NGOs such as Penal Reform International indicate

that these visits help reduce depression and behavioural issues among incarcerated women (Lajore et al., 2025). Likewise in Mexico, Bell (2024) explained that the recognition of the human right to sexual expression within the penal system has led to widespread acceptance of conjugal visits, with both male and female inmates benefiting. Such models have been linked to better inmate conduct, reduced aggression, and increased participation in rehabilitative programmes. These identified examples stand in stark contrast to the Nigerian case, where conjugal visits are either unavailable in corrections for women.

Within the Nigerian correctional service, female inmates do not have the opportunity for conjugal visits. This institutional restriction has been identified as a source of severe emotional and psychological distress. Studies by Aborisade & Oni (2021) and Olorunola et al. (2021) have indicated that many women incarcerated in Nigeria, particularly in the southwest including facilities in Kirikiri, Ibadan, and Abeokuta suffer from anxiety, loneliness, and relational detachment due to prolonged separation from their spouses. The Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison, which houses a significant number of female inmates, has been cited in several reports for its rigid enforcement of rules against intimate partner visitation, despite the growing demand from inmates and prison reform advocates.

One critical and troubling behavioural consequence emerging from this deprivation is the reported increase in homosexual practices among female inmates in Nigerian prisons, especially in Kirikiri. Arua et al. (2024) revealed that the emotional and sexual void created by the absence of conjugal visits has led some female inmates to engage in same-sex relationships within the prison setting. These relationships, while sometimes consensual, are often exploitative and stem from psychological desperation and social pressure. The study found that some of these behaviours were not rooted in prior sexual orientation but were rather adaptations to the prison environment, driven by a need for affection, protection, or emotional survival.

The emergence of such practices has been similarly observed in other African correctional contexts, although often to a lesser extent due to more flexible visitation rights. In South Africa, for example, despite some reports of same-sex relationships among inmates, the availability of conjugal visits reduces the prevalence and normalisation of such adaptations (Kajawo, 2021). This comparison shows the relationship between denied access to intimacy and the adoption of alternative sexual behaviours, which may not align with the inmates' pre-incarceration identities or preferences.

In the Nigerian context, especially in the southwest, the situation reflects broader issues of prison reform, gender sensitivity, and the neglect of female-specific needs. The denial of conjugal visits merely results in temporary discomfort and lead to longer-term psychological impacts, including identity confusion, emotional instability, and the risk of coercive sexual arrangements (Abrifor et al., 2023). These consequences further compromise the rehabilitative mission of correctional institutions and raise questions about the ethical treatment of female inmates under the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, which advocate for the recognition of inmates' humanity and dignity.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The study concludes that aside fiscal commitments of countries to strengthen national security and reduce crime, global attention to improving correctional facility and welfare of the inmates through legislative acts is a precursor to crime reduction and improving the post-correctional life of ex-convicts. While recognising the rights of the male-inmates to equal emotional and sexual needs that have been advocated for the female inmates, the study concludes that the male inmates have higher receptive psychological and emotional values to handle solitary feelings, depression and lack of relational affection than the female inmates. In this instance, the physiological needs of female inmates become new policy regeneration.

The study recommends that the 2019 Nigerian Correctional Service Act should revisit and reviewed to grant conjugal visits rights to female inmates who have already served 70 percent of their commuted service. This legislative reconfiguration should be prioritised by the National Assembly as a building block to addressing rising misdemeanor behaviors of inmates in correctional facility and aftermath of their release into the society.

The ministry of interior should remodel the existing infrastructure and build new ones to enhance operational smoothness and private intimacy for female inmates who are qualified for conjugal the advocated visits.

The Minister of interior can set-up an adhoc committee to assess the operational efficiency of the custodial facility and legislative bedrock in some of the countries who have legalised conjugal visits rights of female inmates to address possible implementation entanglement in the proposed policy.

It is in this light that this paper advocates that policymakers should consider that women's rehabilitation requires an understanding of their social roles and emotional needs, which conjugal visits can help sustain. There is an urgent need for pilot policies to test the feasibility of conjugal visits in Nigerian correctional facilities, particularly in regions with high populations of female inmates.

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