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**FEATURE**

**Still a Teen, Already a Mother:  
Understanding the Teen Motherhood  
Phenomenon Through Photovoice**

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**Abstract.** *Teen motherhood is a growing phenomenon in the Philippines. Among Filipino women ages 15-19, one in 10 is already a mother or pregnant with her first child (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2014). Using participatory action research and photovoice, this study aimed to give voice to teen mothers so that stories of their past and present struggles, and their hopes for the future for themselves and for their child or children could be heard. Through the nominations of the rural health unit officer of selected barangays of one town in North Philippines, the research team contacted possible participants. Four participants continued diligent involvement throughout the photovoice process. The themes that emerged from the data included regret and confusion, seeds of hope, sacrifice and hard work, joys of motherhood, and dreams for the future. The data revealed that teen mothers had the ability to rise above their past and present struggles and nurture their dreams for a bright future.*

**Keywords:** teen motherhood, participatory action research, photovoice, Philippines

**Introduction**

Teen pregnancy and motherhood are major social issues all over the world. Developed and developing countries face the same dilemma. In the United States, while teenage pregnancy rate has decreased, it is still high compared to other industrialized countries in the West (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015; Hamilton & Ventura, 2012). The Sub-Saharan region of Africa, where a

large percentage of the population is teenagers (15-19 years old), the rate of teenage pregnancy is the highest in the world. Fifty percent of the teenage population give birth before their 20th birthday (Coker, 2004). Philippine statistics on teenage pregnancy presents an alarming trend, as well. Of girls, ages ranging from 15-19, one in 10 is already a mother (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2014). According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2012), the Philippines has the highest teenage pregnancy rate among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. From 1999 to 2009, there was a 70% increase in teenage pregnancy in the country and, if not checked, births from teen mothers (ages 15-24) are expected to reach 30 million in the year 2030 (UNFPA, 2012).

Teen motherhood presents several problems (Spear, 2001) to the teen mothers themselves, their children, and the society. When teens become mothers, their life transitions are truncated and their life options are restricted in many ways. Studies show that teen mothers face serious limitations and challenges in terms of healthcare (Maputle, 2006); education (Mangino, 2008; Rivers, 2012; UNICEF Malaysia Communications, 2008); employment opportunities, and economic independence (Coker, 2004; UNICEF Malaysia Communications, 2008). The life outcomes of the children of teen mothers are not promising either. Children born to teen mothers are likely to suffer from low

socio-economic conditions, abuse and neglect, low performance in school, and behavioral problems and to become teen parents themselves (Child Trends Data Bank, 2014; UNICEF Malaysia Communications, 2008). When the rate of teenage mother increases, societal burdens in terms of welfare dependency, instability of family structures, social services, delinquencies, and other issues also increase (Cherry, Byers, Dillon, 2009; Child Trends Child Data Bank, 2014).

### **Review of the Literature**

A teen mother is one who is pregnant before reaching the legal age of adulthood (UNICEF Malaysia Communications, 2008). The age of adulthood differs from country to country. In the Philippines, according to Republic Act No. 6809, the legal age is 18. At this age, boys and girls are already sexually active (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2014).

### **The Context of Teen Motherhood**

Phoenix (1991) conducted a longitudinal study with 50 teen mothers in the United Kingdom. She conducted interviews with her participants during their pregnancy, six months after childbirth, and when the child was two years old. Her pioneering work resulted in a book she published titled *Young Mothers*. Phoenix (1991) tried to address the questions why teens become mothers, what the social

contexts of young girls are who become mothers, and what the outcomes of teen motherhood are.

Research studies show that teenage pregnancy is high among women who are poor, are unemployed, are minorities, and have low educational levels (Coker, 2004; Child Trends Data Bank, 2014; McDonough, 1992). A recent study conducted in the Philippines, however, reveals a different trend (Natividad, 2013). This study found that an increasing incidence of teenage pregnancy is observed among women who come from financially able families, have higher educational attainment, and live in urban areas. She attributed this change to girls having early menarche and the societal acceptance of the practice of cohabitation and out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

### **Outcomes of Teen Motherhood**

Teen pregnancy and motherhood result in serious negative consequences.

Maputle (2006) explored the teen mothers' experiences during their time of pregnancy. The participants disclosed feelings of discomfort and anxiety due to their lack of knowledge about the physical changes that occur during pregnancy and also due to their lack of preparedness because the pregnancy was unplanned. Another difficulty was lack of a support system, a person they could trust and to whom they could confide with their situation. The study which Coker (2004) conducted among women in Sierra Leone revealed that these women were confronted with many difficulties. Among them were dropping out of school, health problems, and coping with the demands of parenthood. McDonough's (1992) findings showed that in areas where there are high rates of teenage motherhood, there are high rates of delinquency.

Other studies, however, showed a positive picture. There are findings that attest that teenage pregnancy and motherhood, according to the participants' self-reports, could bring about personal transformation in the teen mothers (Guerra, 2010; Mangino, 2008; Rivers, 2012; Seamark & Lings, 2004; Spear, 2001) and that they were perceived by their teachers to be more determined and goal-oriented (Rivers, 2012). Seamark and Lings (2004) expound that motherhood became an impetus for teen mothers to change and to redirect their lives, focusing on their own future and the future of their child or children. Although the participants of Seamark and Lings (2004) expressed disappointment for lack of initial support from their family members, they revealed that this disappointment was eclipsed by their excitement on having a baby.

At the time of pregnancy, Sloan's (2012) study revealed that the participants were confronted with the decision whether to continue with the pregnancy or not. Further, once they became mothers, they had to seriously consider their educational and employment options. These decisions, according to teen mothers, were not easy to make. Hence, they will greatly benefit from the support of their

families, trusted adults, social workers, and counselors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015; Dole, 2009; Guerra, 2010). More so, teen mothers who received strong support from their families and from school managed to finish high school, while their counterparts who did not have such kind of support failed to do so (Jamal, 2014; Mangino, 2008). Mangino (2008) stressed the teen mothers' need for acceptance and support from their families. The participants in Rivers' (2012) study revealed that the support of at least one female during their pregnancy and unto motherhood made a difference. More so, these women emphasized that education is key to a better future.

Since teen motherhood is a phenomenon with high incidence in developed and developing countries and with negative consequences to the mother, the children, and the society; there is a need to understand it so that appropriate measures can be taken to control its rise and to address the problems associated with it. Most of the studies on teen pregnancy and motherhood were done in the United Kingdom (Sloan, 2012; Vincent, 2009; Yu, 2010) and in the United States (Dole, 2009; Dudley, Crowder, & Montgomery, 2014; Jamal, 2014; Mangino, 2008; McDonough, 1992; Strunk, 2008) to mention a few. But, in the Philippines, while teen pregnancy and motherhood has become a growing trend at an alarming rate (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2014), few studies have been done (Badiane, 2005; Natividad, 2013; Upadhyay, 2006). Hence, more studies should be conducted especially using research frameworks that give voice to teen mothers to share their stories and provide venues for their participation in the crafting of policies.

This study problematized the phenomenon of teen pregnancy and motherhood and sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of teen mothers before and during their pregnancy, and during motherhood?
2. How do teen mothers envision the future—for themselves and for their children?

### **Methodology**

This section discusses the research design, the research setting, and the participants. It also outlines the steps of the data gathering procedures and analysis which followed the major phases outlined by Wang and Burris (1997) in conducting photovoice. These major phases are implementing the method and analysis, disseminating findings, and advocating policy.

**Research Design**

This study is qualitative, using the paradigm of participatory action research which focuses on empowering disadvantaged groups. It is based on Freire's ideology of awakening the people's critical consciousness to their condition and providing them a venue to find solutions to their social problems (Freire, 1970). Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), which is one of the methods of participatory action research, was used as the guiding framework for data gathering and analysis. Photovoice was first used by Wang and Burris in their study of the reproductive health issues of rural women in Yunan Province in China (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). The goal of photovoice is to heighten the awareness of the participants of their community issues, to engage in dialogues to provide solutions to their problems, and to reach policy makers (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997).

**Research Setting and Participants**

This study was conducted in one of the towns in a province in North Philippines. This town is situated along a busy national highway which connects two major cities—

Manila and Baguio. The participants were selected with the help of the rural health officer who nominated teen mothers in the municipality. One member of the research team contacted the nominated names and ten of them consented to participate. Four of those ten recruited participants, however, did not come during orientation and two withdrew after orientation and training on photography. Four participants continued their involvement in the research process until the last step.

The average age of the participants was 18.25 at the time of the study. The average age was 16 at the time of pregnancy. Three participants came from homes that were below poverty level. On the educational level, one finished elementary school, two finished high school, and one dropped out of college. All four participants were not attending school at the time of the study, which took place in 2015. For the civil status, one was married, two were cohabiting with their partners, and one was unwed and abandoned by her partner. As for the social and financial contexts, three were living with their parents and receiving familial support and one was living alone with her child with no familial support. Last, Participant 1 (P1) had two children ages 3 and 2 years. Participant 2 (P2) had a 2-year-old baby and was 7 months pregnant with her second child. Participant 3 (P3) had one child, age 2. Participant 4 (P4) had one child, age 2.

**Data Gathering Procedures**

The steps outlined below were based on the framework used by Wang and Burris (1997) with some modifications. We decided to include in-depth

interviews and photo essay. Due to time constraints in terms of our engagement with our participants, the decision to include in-depth interview was to collect more data about the participants' experiences. The photo essay was done to provide a venue where the participants could talk about their photos, share the meanings of their photos with each other, organize their photos into themes, and prepare for the photo exhibit.

### **Preliminaries**

Before we started the data gathering, we followed the preliminaries done by Wang and Burris (1997). We conceptualized the problem. We selected the site. Our choice was based on our access and the high incidence of teen motherhood in the area. We obtained permission from barangay officials. We recruited participants through the help of the rural health officer. We obtain the verbal consent of the participants and had them sign the informed consent form. Last, we trained the members of the research team how to conduct photovoice.

### **Implementation Method and Data Analysis**

The first phase of photovoice is *implementation method and analysis*. During this phase, we paid a courtesy call to the barangay officials and the rural health officer. We then oriented the participants on the concepts of photovoice. After that, we endorsed cameras to the participants. We trained the participants how to take good photos and oriented them on the ethics of photography. We devised the themes for the first set of photos and second set of photos. The theme of the first set of photos was their life as a teen mother, while the theme of the second set of photos was what they wished their life and the life of their children would be like. We gave our participants time to take photos.

The participants took as many photos as they liked that captured the themes. Then they chose the best five of their photos for each theme. Our participants engaged in critical reflection and dialogue about the photos that they had taken. During the photo presentation and interpretation, they explained their photos using the SHOWed framework (Wallerstein, as cited in Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998). This framework allowed the participants to focus on the following questions: What do you **S**ee here? What's really **H**appening here? How does this relate to **O**ur lives? **W**hy does this problem or strength exist? What can we **D**o about this?

Aside from photo presentation and interpretation, we also conducted in-depth interviews with our participants. We asked them to share with us their experiences as teen mothers. To better understand the lives of our participants, with their consent, we visited them in their homes. As a team, we held debriefing sessions after a day's fieldwork. Our debriefing sessions focused on three questions: What

have we learned about qualitative research which we did not know before? What went well about our data gathering and fieldwork today? In what areas can we improve and what can we do about them?

The last activity for this phase was a photo essay. Our participants discussed the meaning of their photos with each other and grouped the photos according to themes. During this process, they selected which photos best captured the themes. Some photos which revealed the same theme as the other photos and those which did not belong to any of the recurring themes were discarded.

### **Dissemination of Findings**

The second phase of photovoice is *dissemination of findings*. The major activity that we did was the photo exhibit. It was held in the municipal hall. Permission was obtained from the municipal mayor and government agencies such as the Office of the Municipal Mayor and the Department of Social Welfare Development (DSWD). The photo exhibit was attended by barangay officials, director of the DSWD, municipal office staff, and some residents. During the photo exhibit, each participant had the opportunity to talk about a theme—the photos that represented the theme and the stories behind those photos. After the presentations, the barangay officials and the director of the DSWD gave their responses. The photo exhibit ended with a lunch. We were joined by the participants, government officials, and other guests. Aside from the photo exhibit, we disseminated the findings of our study through presentation in research conferences and now through this publication.

### **Advocating Policy**

The third phase of photovoice is *advocating policy*. This phase includes recruiting and reaching out to policy makers (Wang et al., 1998). During the photo exhibit, the policy makers were informed of the findings. Through this venue, we hope that our findings will influence the policies that they will craft to address the issue of teen motherhood.

### **Sources of Data**

For triangulation purposes, we used multiple sources of data. Aside from the data from the photos, we conducted in-depth interviews and made observation notes in the form of analytic memos and journals. Our analytic memos and journals included our initial analysis, our observations, snippets of conversations with our participants and with one another, and our reflections during the debriefing sessions.

### **Reflexivity**

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We, the researchers, are Christian researchers and educators. We believe in the value of every individual, especially the youth. As researchers, one of our advocacies is the empowerment of marginalized groups, among them teens and women. In this research study, we focused on teen mothers, specifically those who are still in their twenties or thirties. Through our study, we hoped to give our participants a venue to make sense of their experiences and to find direction for the future. However, as Christians, we are also moralists who have the tendency to judge another person's behavior or condition as right or wrong based on moral principles espoused in the Bible, as we understand them. To ensure that our participants could express their views without feeling being judged about their condition as teen mothers, all of them having borne their child out of wedlock, we as a team talked about our preconceived ideas about how we viewed teen mothers and their condition. We recognized our stand as a Christian that while we do not approve premarital sex, it is our duty to restore the dignity of a human being and to give them hope. As educators, we believe in the importance of education in freeing individuals and societies from poverty and ignorance and giving them freedom to dream for a better future.

### **Findings and Discussion**

During the photo essay, the participants came up with one overarching theme to summarize their experiences. They decided to title their stories as *Ang Buhay ng mga Batang Ina* (The Lifeworld of a Teen Mother). In the Filipino language, the word *bata* when translated to English is *child*. Hence, the image here is of a girl who is only a child and yet is already a mother.

### **Recurring Themes**

To capture their lives as teen mothers, the participants identified five themes. These are (a) regret and confusion (*pagsisisi at kaguluhan*), (b) seeds of hope (*binhi ng pag-asa*), (c) sacrifice and hard work (*pagsasakripisyo at pagsisikap*), (d) joys of motherhood (*ligaya ng ina*), and (e) dreams for the future (*mga pangarap sa kinabukasan*). Under the last theme, dreams for the future, are three sub-themes: going back to school and planning to graduate (*pag-aaral at pagtatapos*), financial freedom (*matiwasa na buhay*), and bright future for their children (*magandang kinabukasan ng aming mga anak*).



**Regret and confusion.** The participants revealed that at the first stage of their pregnancy and motherhood, they experienced regret and confusion. P2 confided



P1, Photo #5, Chaos

during the in-depth interview: “I was afraid to give birth. Sometimes I thought of aborting the baby.” But she said, she could not do it because “it is a sin against God” (Folder 2, p. 1). P1, titled one of her photos “Chaos.” She explained, “My life was chaotic. I lost hope to finish my studies. Oftentimes, I wonder how I can finish my studies, what the future of my children will be” (Photo #5–Chaos, Folder 5, p. 1).

P3, who was abandoned by her partner during her pregnancy and hence lived alone, underwent so much suffering which was heightened by the absence of support not only from her partner but also from her parents.



P2, Photo #2, Expensive & Ordinary

Another participant revealed her regret in her explanation of her Photo #2 which she titled “Expensive and Ordinary.” She expounded, “The beautiful and expensive shoe represents my life before my pregnancy. I could get what I wanted. But now life is hard and this kind of life is represented by the ordinary slipper” (Folder 7, p. 3). P2 realized the difficulties posed by motherhood and the financial demands of having a child. In spite of the strong support she received from her partner and mother, she regretted

over her decision to have a child at an early age when she said she was not yet ready.

At the time of their pregnancy, teen mothers experience some anxiety (Maputle, 2006). More so, they recognize the need to make important decisions, one of which was whether to continue the pregnancy or not (Sloan, 2012). When teens become pregnant, they go through many challenges which they are not prepared to face.

**Seeds of hope.** The participants expressed that in spite of the difficulties that they went through from the time of their pregnancy to motherhood, they were not desperate. Their hopes were captured by Photo #2 of P2 which she titled “Euphorbia.” She said, “This flower has lots of thorns but at the tip of each stem there’s a small flower. This symbolizes my life. I can overcome all my difficulties, all my trials. There is something beautiful at the end of all of this” (Folder 6, p. 2).



One of the four themes that emerged in the study of Spear (2001) was optimism. The participants attested that their situation was manageable and that their pregnancy was not a liability nor a crisis. Another theme was nurturance which encapsulates the participants’ “attachment to the fetus during pregnancy and plan to meeting the needs of their babies after birth” (p. 577). Further, the participants of another study confided that they had positive attitudes toward their being teen mothers and that they were aspiring for a bright future (Seamark & Lings, 2004).

**Sacrifice and hard work.** All the participants expressed that the demands of motherhood were great. They mentioned the difficulties they experienced especially when the child was sick. When narrating her experience about her sick daughter, P2 could not stop sobbing. She showed us her *halo-halo* set during our visit to her home. She sold *halo-halo*, which is a dessert made of ground ice mixed with milk and sugar and other ingredients. She said she also helped her mother in giving nail care to customers who came to their house.

Of the four participants, P3 captured the reality of abject poverty associated with teen motherhood, in her Photo #2 which she titled “Carrying a Load”. She and several teens who were mostly males chopped wood up the mountain. Sometimes they turned the wood into coal, carried a big sack over their heads or shoulders, and sold them to the townfolk. Expounding her photo, she said, “Life is difficult. I chop wood and carry this heavy load from the mountain. I have to work hard so that my daughter will not experience the life that I have” (Folder 7, p. 3). P3 lived alone with her daughter who was about 3 years old. She would leave her in the care of neighbors or family members when she was up in the mountain to cut wood. She repeatedly underscored her desire to give her child a good life. During our visit to her home, P3 was away chopping wood. But we saw how clean her house and its surroundings were and how neatly dressed her daughter was (Folder 9, p. 10).



The difficulties that teen mothers experience are complicated by the fact that most of them come from disadvantaged backgrounds and hence cannot expect financial support from their families. The participants in the longitudinal study by SmithBattle (2007), though, in spite of work and household demands, resolved to work hard as evidenced by their improved grades. In addition, the participants in Rivers' (2012) study and SmithBattle (2007) nurtured a heightened interest in school even though they were confronted with perceived unfriendly school practices.

**Joys of motherhood.** Life was not all hardship and sacrifice for the teen mothers. P3, who faced many challenges, said her burdens were lightened when she would see or think of her daughter. P1 took a picture of herself and her two sons and titled it "Bonding" (Folder 5, p. 4). She said she experienced a "love that is so sweet" while holding her children or when thought about them. She also took a picture of her father holding her two sons. She said when she had children, she felt the love of her parents which she did not experience before. "We had more time for each other and when I see them taking care of my sons and lavishing their love on them, I begin to understand that that is also the kind of love they have for me" (Folder 5, p. 4). P4 asked her husband to take a picture of her and her son and titled it "Sweet Moments." She explained, "It's a different feeling to have a child of your own. Life has more meaning when you're a mother. It is a gift. It is a privilege" (Folder 8, p. 2). This theme on finding life's meaning and carving a new path is echoed by other teen mothers (Rivers, 2012; Seamark & Lings, 2004; Spear, 2001).



**Bright hopes for the future.** The theme, bright hopes for the future, focused on the teen mothers' dreams for themselves and for their children. There are sub-themes under this theme: (a) going back to school and planning to graduate, (b) financial freedom, and (c) bright future for their children.

**Going back to school and planning to graduate.** During the in-depth interview, P2 expressed her dream by stating, "I want to go back to school and continue my studies. I can give my children a better future. I can send them to school and they can also graduate" (Folder 6, p. 5). Even P3, who finished only elementary level, wanted to continue her studies and earn a degree. P4, who was already in college, said she would go back to school. She was just waiting for her husband to graduate and for the baby to grow a little bigger and then she would finish her studies. For P1, P2, and P3, however, going back to school would not be as easy as they wished. Confronted with financial limitations, they said going back to school would be hard and that they could not attain the degree they desired without help. During the photo exhibit, the government officials

encouraged them to be steadfast in their dreams and assured them of government support through scholarships (Folder 9, p. 12).

While teen motherhood is beset with poor educational outcomes, there were studies that showed that teen mothers could succeed (Mangino, 2008; Rivers, 2012; SmithBattle, 2006). SmithBattle (2006) emphasizes the need for family and school support. In her study among 13 Latina and their experiences with teen pregnancy, Guerra (2010) affirmed the significant difference social workers make when they help teen mothers plan for their future.

**Financial freedom.** The participants took photos of a house, a car, a department store selling garments and shoes and bags, a *sari-sari* store (a small store common in the Philippines that sells items for everyday household needs), women wearing corporate clothes. They said these photos captured who they wanted to be and what they wanted to have. Their desire to provide for the needs of their children came out as a recurring theme. They continued to explain that what they desired was a simple yet peaceful life. “Just enough,” “to have money when my child needs something,” “to be able to eat,” “to send my children to school,” “to have a simple house” were phrases that were repeated during the in-depth interviews, photo interpretation, photo essay, and photo exhibit.

**Bright future for their children.** Among the photos which the participants assigned under this sub-theme were a family praying together, a woman in a graduation gown, a woman at work, a clock, a cosmetic set, and an open Bible. P1 explained that she had a vision of her children finishing college (Folder 5, p. 5). Through her photo of a clock, P2 said she wanted her children to make use of every opportunity and to develop a noble character. She also explained another photo, a cosmetic set, as a symbol of beauty that should not only be outward but inward as well. A beautiful woman, she said, is most of all beautiful inside (Folder 6, p. 4). P3 explained that it was her desire that her child would grow up to know God and trust Him, finish her studies, and find a stable job. She wanted her daughter to read the Bible, pray, and be God-fearing (Folder 7, p. 5). Her photo of a woman at work captured P4’s dreams for her children. She wanted them to complete a college education and find a job. All the four participants shared the same dream for their children—finishing a degree and getting a job. More so, they underscored that the spiritual and moral dimension of life is an important component of success.

The findings of Guerra (2010) and Seamark and Lings (2004) revealed that teen mothers think of the future of their children. SmithBattle (2006, 2007) found out that teen mothers want to go back to school and give their children better chances to life. Given the overwhelming challenges of motherhood responsibilities and financial limitations, the teen mothers’ dreams for the future may not come true, unless they are given strong support by their family, their school, and the government.

### **Conclusion**

Through participatory action research and photovoice, some insights that would provide policymakers and other stakeholders some understanding into the phenomenon were gleaned. Teen mothers shared their experiences and how they made sense of their experiences. They revealed that, as teen mothers, they went through a period of regret over the decisions they made that led to their situation. Feelings of regret were followed by confusion as they seemed not to see a way out. During this time, they were confronted with life-changing questions such as whether to continue the pregnancy or not and how they could continue their studies. All the participants made the difficult decision to continue their pregnancy. They further shared how their understanding of the meaning of life and their appreciation that motherhood is a gift especially when they held their baby for the first time were heightened. Such understanding helped them resolve to work hard for their future and for the future of their children. In spite of their challenges, the teen mothers realized that motherhood is a joyous period of one's life as they experienced the special bond between mother and child. They also recognized the role that their family, the school, and the government play in helping them fulfill their dreams for themselves and for their children and that, unless provided with structures from these support groups, their dreams would remain only a wish.

Teen motherhood is a phenomenon and a social problem. Hence, researchers, educators, community health practitioners, and policymakers must continue to seek to understand it and address issues related to it. School administration, health practitioners, government officials, and policymakers need to introduce policies and programs that will give teen mothers better chances to life. More so, considering the advantages of photovoice as a research method, researchers may use it to continue to empower marginalized groups such as children, teens, minorities, and others to give them voice and participation in personal and community change.

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