

## Article

# Women's Promotion to Management and Unfairness Perceptions—A Challenge to the Social Sustainability of the Organizations and Beyond

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**Abstract:** Inequality between women and men in top management positions is still a current reality where women are underrepresented. Gender discrimination against women in managerial positions violates the Sustainable Development Goal of gender equality. Gender discrimination affects women but also has negative consequences for employee output. Our aim is analyzing how the role of gender moderates the relationship between gender barriers to managerial positions and performance, mediated by organizational justice and commitment, and whether this relationship is stronger in women than in men. This study was carried out with 1278 employees (45.2% women and 54.8% men) of a Spanish financial group consisting of three different organizations. We performed a moderated mediation path analysis with Mplus. Results show that some gender barriers are associated with lower perceptions of organizational justice, which in turn are associated with lower organizational commitment, thus reducing performance. Moreover, this relationship is significant in men and women for work–family balance and barriers to accessing influential networks, but for unfair HR policies and practices, it is only significant in women. Removing gender barriers and unfairness perceptions is the goal that will contribute to organizational sustainability from the gender perspective.

**Keywords:** gender inequality; gender barriers; unfairness perception; organizational justice; organizational outcomes

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## 1. Introduction

Women are underrepresented in top management positions. Gender discrimination is still present in the labor market in general, and specifically in the upper levels of organizations. Catalyst [1] reports that only 13 women (2.6%) were CEOs of Fortune Global 500 companies in 2020. The percentage of women decreases as the levels of management progress, as follows: approximately 37% were managers, 29% were senior managers, and 23% were executives [2]. Specifically, in Spain, men find a position in top management more easily than women [3], which confirms the persistence of the glass ceiling. Inequality between women and men is due to social prejudices, mostly because of gender barriers present in organizations. Gender barriers pose a serious threat to equal opportunities for women and their social rights [4]. Studies have focused on the analysis of what the main barriers are, in order to identify them and later break them down [5–7]. However, few studies have examined the barriers' influence and consequences for organizational results [8], although some studies recognize that gender discrimination implies financial losses and decreased innovation affecting the growth and competitiveness of companies [9–11].

Perceptions of unfairness motivated by gender discrimination could negatively contribute to individual attitudes and behaviors, as well as organizational outcomes such as performance, commitment, organizational justice, organizational citizenship behavior, satisfaction, and welfare, among other aspects [12–15]. Hence, research on discrimination against women continues to be an interesting issue that must be addressed from different perspectives.

Social sustainability, as the current goal in business, involves contributing to reducing inequality and promoting gender equality. Social sustainability cannot be achieved as long as organizations continue to discriminate against women in managerial positions. In this regard, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 by all the United Nations Member States in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, include the goal of gender equality. Specifically, the fifth goal is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls because “ending all discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, it’s crucial for sustainable future; it’s proven that empowering women and girls helps economic growth and development” [16]. Moreover, gender equality is also included in SDG 8, which relates to decent work and economic growth; and SDG 10 focused on the reduction in inequality within and among countries.

Gender discrimination affects women directly, but an organization that discriminates against a group of employees also produces negative consequences for the organization as a whole [17]. As these authors mention, the employees who perceive gender discrimination and injustice at their workplace may feel less emotionally attached to the organization and care less about the firm’s well-being than employees who feel equally treated. Moreover, the glass ceiling beliefs and thoughts are important predictors of work engagement and burnout [18]. In the same way, perception of gender discrimination is related to poor employee job attitudes, physical health outcomes and behaviors, psychological health, and work-related outcomes [11].

Gender equity has been pointed out as a key aspect for social sustainability, in different aspects such as sustainable leadership [19] or education in STEM fields [20]. The sustainability challenge would improve women’s situation in management and, at the same time, contribute to improving the results of the overall organization. Gender equality at work promotes inclusive and sustainable growth, but it also develops potential economic growth because it can increase the identification of employees with the company and improve innovation and productivity [21]. Different studies found the following similar relationships between gender discrimination and organizational outcomes: negative relationships between perceived gender discrimination and affective commitment, organizational identification, and a positive relationship among perceived gender discrimination and turnover [17,22,23].

The aim of this paper is to analyze how the perception of women’s barriers to accessing managerial positions is related to organizational justice, organizational commitment, and performance. Thus, our paper contributes to the scarce research analyzing the moderating role of gender in the relationship between barriers to women’s access to managerial positions and performance, mediated by organizational justice and commitment. More specifically, we test how barriers to women’s promotion to managerial positions are associated with performance through the mediation chain of justice perceptions and organizational commitment, and whether this relationship is stronger in women than in men. Our contribution provides evidence about the relationship between the barriers for women’s access to managerial positions and perceptions of organizational employees, both for men and women, and the effects that such barriers have on relevant organizational outcomes. Thus, gender equitable access to managerial positions appears to have a requirement for social sustainability, but it is also a relevant variable to reach sustainable performance. First, we review previous evidence about barriers to women’s promotion and their relationships with organizational justice perceptions, as well as the relationship between organizational justice and commitment and performance. Then, we describe the

method used in an empirical study carried out in a financial group to test these relationships and the results obtained. Finally, a discussion is provided.

## 2. An Overview of Gender Discrimination and Gender Barriers

Women's representation in management has made considerable progress in the past few decades. The general access of women to the labor market, equal opportunities policies, and higher education levels, among other aspects, have contributed to improving the percentage of women in top positions. Despite this increase, gender discrimination in management roles still persists. For example, in the European Union in 2021-B1, 20.7% of executives from the largest listed companies were women, but only 7.9% of CEOs were women [24]. In Spain, this percentage was even lower, where only 3% of CEOs were women [24]. Thus, the famous glass ceiling metaphor to explain women's difficulties in accessing managerial positions, along with the labyrinth metaphor proposed by Eagly and Carli [25], continue to be valid at present.

Gender discrimination by organizations implies a lack of organizational justice as well as a lack of well-being and lower quality of life and work, especially for women [26–28]. Eliminating this negative situation for women is an important challenge for organizations in reaching social sustainability, and it is one of the most important strategic objectives. Ending this unequal situation for women is important, not only because it is a human right, but also because of the waste of female talent when women are highly prepared to be managers. Women can contribute to the strategic value to organizations [12]. Moreover, gender diversity contributes to successful organizational development. As [29] mentioned, there is considerable research linking broad gender diversity with major organizational outcomes. Achieving the organizational objectives of corporate social responsibility and social sustainability involves improving the working conditions of all employees, eliminating gender inequality, and promoting gender diversity management, in line with the aims of the International Labor Organization's Decent Work Agenda in 2019.

A number of research studies have focused on analyzing the barriers women face in accessing management positions. A wide variety of gender barriers have been considered and categorized into different levels, such as the following: the individual and the organizational level [13]; the macro-societal and micro-individual levels [26], which are reproduced in organizational structures [30]; intra-personal, interpersonal, explicit, and implicit contextual constraint levels [31]; variables external and internal to organizations [32]. An integrated multilevel model of women's career equality [7] considered the national socio-economic and gender context and the organizational and individual antecedents that are affected by the societal context, as well as the influence on individual and organizational outcomes. Although the barriers have been structured at different levels, there is some consensus about their identification. Among the main gender barriers, we can highlight androcentric cultural values, women's competencies, attitudes, and motivations, gender stereotypes and roles, organizational culture, human resources policies and practices, unequal performance appraisal, social networks, and groups of power mainly made up of men, the lack of female role models or mentors for other women, and work–family balance [8]. Although some of these barriers operate at different levels, it is important to highlight their interconnected nature and mutual reinforcement.

In this article, we focus on four categories of barriers that women frequently face in their promotion to managerial positions. Career development is one of the relevant job features expected from working environments. When women find obstacles that impede their advancement to management, they can feel unfairly treated by their companies, especially when the organization has some responsibility for the existence of these barriers, both through its actions (the company explicitly contributes to this barrier) or by omission (the company does not act to remove the barriers). In this regard, if employees perceive the presence of such barriers, they will view the organization as unfair, non-inclusive, and unequal for some of its employees, specifically women. Thus, they will develop perceptions of organizational injustice. Social exchange theory [33] provides a theoretical

rationale for this relationship between organizational actions that provides an unequal treatment for some individuals with perceptions of inequity and further reactions to such perceived injustice.

Hence, some of the human resources policies and practices developed by companies (i.e., career development, organization of timetables, training, and salary remuneration) could adopt a male perspective and a gendered bias, maintaining gender discrimination. These practices could be designed with men in mind and excluding women, without considering women's expectations and goals. They could be applied less frequently to women than to men, or they could result in different outcomes for women and men, as in the case of selection practices [34].

In addition, women frequently state that they are valued less than men; they have to demonstrate their competencies and skills more than men do, and they are subject to stricter performance standards [30,35,36]. Thus, this unequal performance appraisal makes access to managerial positions more difficult for women than for men.

Influential networks and groups of power, which are critical for career advancement, are composed mainly of men, and women are excluded from them. For women, it is difficult to get access to these networks because most men prefer to create links with other men and because women feel uncomfortable entering these networks, and they lack the necessary familiarity and personal resources to be involved in these influential groups. This makes it more difficult for women to access valuable information, social contacts, and opportunities that flow in these networks and facilitate career advancement. It also means there is a lack of female mentors and female managers as role models [6,37].

Demands associated with the work–family balance contribute to gender inequality. Despite social changes, women take care of family responsibilities more than men do. Although this barrier affects both men and women, because women spend more time on family care, they find it more difficult to advance in their careers [38].

These four barriers to women's promotion interact with each other. The need for work–family balance and differences between men and women in their family and care responsibilities influence the development of some human resources policies. Unequal performance appraisal also influences human resources practices and contributes to impeding women's involvement in male networks.

When employees perceive gender barriers, both women and men feel that they are working in an unfair organization; that is, if they perceive that there are gender barriers, the perception of organizational injustice grows. These perceptions of injustice could reduce employees' organizational commitment and performance [39].

When female employees perceive that they are treated unequally by their organizations, for instance, when they are evaluated more strictly than men, they will perceive that the organization is not fair to them. Male employees will also consider their organization unjust because their female co-workers are discriminated against. However, because women are the direct targets of discrimination, we expect the relationship between the perception of barriers and the perception of organizational justice to be higher in women than in men. In sum, women and men who perceive gender discrimination in their organization will perceive lower organizational justice, but women who experience unequal treatment directly will perceive lower organizational justice than men.

### 3. Justice Perceptions and their Relationship with Organizational Outcomes

All the above-mentioned gender barriers hinder women's advancement into managerial roles, and so we can consider that there is no fairness in organizations because women do not feel as accepted, respected, and valued as men. Justice should be present in organizations not only because it is a human right, but also because organizational fairness has important consequences in the workplace. In this regard, some studies have shown that gender obstacles had a significant influence on organizational performance and its future sustainability [12–15]. The literature points out that organizations are more efficient when they have diverse managerial teams and provide equal opportunities for

their employees' development [40]. Thus, a lack of gender diversity in management teams due to gender discrimination negatively influences efficiency levels. Moreover, when there is no equity in women's access and promotion to top management positions, employees feel that they are in an unfair organization, especially women, but also men. An unfair organizational climate contributes to developing feelings of poor job satisfaction, lower motivation levels, low commitment, and poor performance levels.

Although justice has been a basic argument for allowing women to have access to management roles, the justice perception around initiatives for this advancement is often negative [41]. For instance, some family-friendly policies are perceived as unjust because they are addressed mainly to women and, consequently, inhibit advances in gender equity. Some studies [42,43] have shown that justice perceptions are critical to the success of organizational activities designed to achieve gender advancement [41].

The relationship between justice perceptions and organizational outcomes can be explained by social exchange theory [44]. Organizational justice is related to performance because attitudes affect performance [45,46]. According to Cohen-Charash and Spector [47], distributive justice is related to cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to outcomes, such as performance. Procedural justice is also related to cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions, but toward the organization, such as organizational commitment, interactional justice is related to cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions, but in this case toward the managerial staff. Perceptions of organizational justice are linked to positive outcomes as a result of reciprocity. If they feel fairly treated, employees develop a feeling of trust in their managers and companies, which in turn leads to positive emotional links (affective organizational commitment) and to acting for the greater good of the company, performing well, being involved in goal achievement, and doing their best with colleagues and customers, thus increasing contextual performance, innovation, or service quality.

Furthermore, many studies have linked justice perceptions to work outcomes such as organizational commitment and performance at an individual level. Moorman et al. [34] found positive relationships between procedural justice and organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB, considered one of most relevant aspects of contextual performance). Cohen-Charash and Spector's [47] meta-analysis found significant relationships between different dimensions of organizational justice and work performance in field and laboratory studies, as well as relationships with diverse dimensions of OCB and counterproductive work behaviors (CWB). In addition, organizational justice positively predicted affective and normative dimensions of commitment and negatively predicted the continuance dimension. Colquitt et al.'s [44] meta-analysis also found significant relationships between the dimensions of organizational justice and both performance indicators (OCB and task performance) and social exchange quality indicators (trust and organizational commitment, among other variables).

In the same vein, empirical research found significant relationships between some of the dimensions of organizational justice and different outcomes, as follows: loyalty to senior management and cooperation among USA public workers [48]; affective commitment, moderated by group cohesion, in sport settings [49]; overall organizational commitment [50–52], moderated by organization-based self-esteem and an external locus of control [53]. These relationships with different dimensions of organizational commitment were in some cases mediated by perceived supervisory support or perceived organizational support [54]. Similarly, Moon et al. [55] found support for a sequential model from perceptions of corporate social responsibility to organizational justice dimensions, affective commitment, and compassion.

In addition, evidence was found for the relationship between organizational justice and different performance indicators (task performance, dimensions of OCB, and innovative behaviors). Nazir et al. [56] found significant relationships between three organizational justice dimensions and innovative behaviors (a measure related to job performance), partially mediated by affective commitment and POS. Chen and Jin [57] found

significant relationships between organizational justice and two measures of OCB, mediated by leader–member exchange and perceived organizational support. Otto and Mamatoglu [58], in a sample of information technology-based workers in Germany, found that interactional justice had a direct effect on job performance, as well as an indirect effect through POS and organizational loyalty.

In some cases, research has found evidence for a sequence of organizational justice–organizational commitment performance indicators. Thus, Jehanzeb and Mohanty [59], in a sample of bank officers from Pakistan, found a significant relationship between organizational justice and OCB, fully mediated by organizational commitment. Similarly, Donglong et al. [60] found that procedural justice was significantly related to OCB towards the organization and interactional justice predicted OCB towards individuals, in this case with a partially mediated effect through affective commitment.

Furthermore, the relationships between organizational justice and commitment and performance have been replicated at the collective level [61,62]. Cropanzano et al. [39] found significant effects of procedural and interpersonal “peer justice” (a collective measure of organizational justice) on task performance and team citizenship behaviors, partially mediated by task team process and interpersonal teamwork process. Whitman et al.’s [63] meta-analysis found significant relationships between organizational justice climate (collective perceptions of justice) and performance and work attitudes, including organizational commitment. Shin et al. [64] found that both individual perceptions of procedural justice and procedural justice climate (team level) significantly predicted organizational commitment, which in turn predicted helping behaviors. Justice climate strength moderated these relationships. Moon [65] found significant relationships between procedural and interpersonal justice climate and organizational performance (goal attainment) and collective turnover rates. Moreover, a recent study [66] found that peer justice is associated with greater benefits of applying high-performance work practices.

Thus, social exchange theory and past and recent empirical evidence support the relationships between organizational justice and organizational commitment and performance in different work settings, countries, and cultures at the individual and collective levels. Organizational justice showed significant and consistent effects on organizational commitment and performance, but some of the studies showed a mediation effect of organizational commitment in the relationship between justice and performance. This is in line with the classical meta-analysis [67], which pointed out that organizational commitment is a significant predictor of performance.

As the literature review indicates, most studies have pointed out that organizational justice perceptions influence organizational commitment and employee performance. However, few studies have examined whether the perception of unfairness due to gender barriers can influence work outcomes that have an impact on the success of organizations. There is a lack of studies analyzing the relationship between gender barriers and work outcomes through perceptions of organizational justice, and the moderator role of gender in these relationships. In order to add to the previous knowledge, the present study tests the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Employees’ perceptions of barriers to women’s promotion are negatively associated with perceptions of organizational justice.*

**Hypothesis 1 (H1a).** *Barriers resulted from unequal performance appraisal are negatively associated with perceptions of organizational justice.*

**Hypothesis 1 (H1b).** *Barriers related to accessing influential and power networks are negatively associated with perceptions of organizational justice.*

**Hypothesis 1 (H1c).** *Barriers related to work–life balance are negatively associated with perceptions of organizational justice.*

**Hypothesis 1 (H1d).** Barriers resulted from unequal HR practices and Policies are negatively associated with perceptions of organizational justice.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** Employees' perceptions of organizational justice are positively related to perceptions of organizational commitment.

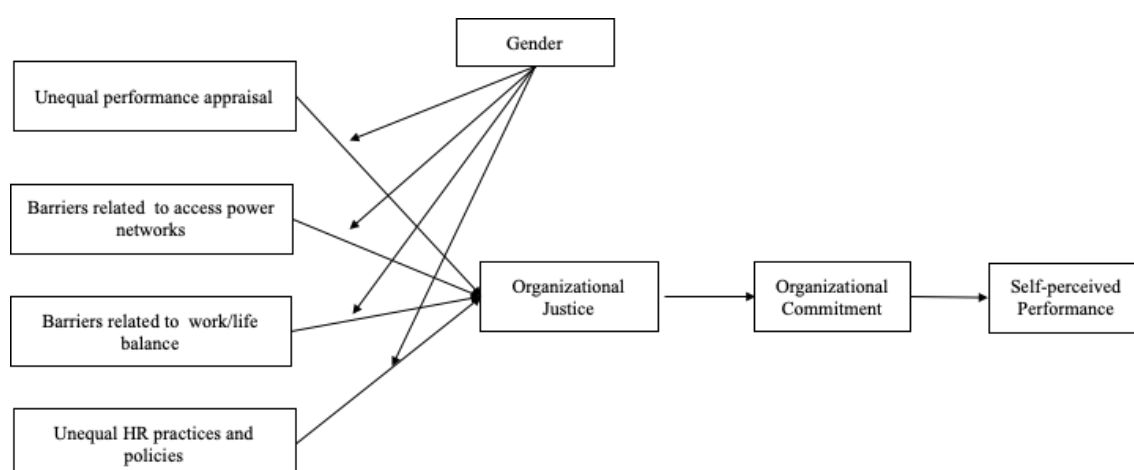
**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** Employees' perceptions of organizational commitment are positively related to self-perceived performance.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** The relationship between perceptions of barriers to women's promotion and self-perceived performance is mediated by the chain from organizational justice to organizational commitment, showing a negative indirect effect.

**Hypothesis 5 (H5).** The negative relationship between perceptions of barriers to women's promotion and organizational justice is moderated by the employees' gender. Thus, this relationship is stronger in women than in men.

**Hypothesis 6 (H6).** Employees' gender moderates the indirect effects of barriers to women's promotion on self-perceived performance through organizational justice and commitment, such that the negative indirect effects on self-perceived performance will be stronger in women and weaker in men.

We hypothesize a moderated mediation model to explain the relationship between perceptions of barriers to women's promotion and performance. Integrating the relationships proposed so far, we propose a model where gender moderates the indirect relationship between perceptions of barriers to women's promotion and self-perceived performance through organizational justice and commitment (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Theoretical Model (M1).

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Procedure and Sample

Data were collected online in a Spanish financial group that was interested in knowing the situation of employees regarding gender equity before designing its equity plan. All the employees in the company received an e-mail with a link to the survey. This link brought them to a site where they could voluntarily reply to the questionnaire. Employees received two reminders to reply. Respondents' anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed since there was no link between the questionnaire and their e-mails.

Data were obtained from 1304 employees of a Spanish financial group consisting of three different organizations. The response rate was 21.8%. After excluding missing

responses of independent and dependent variables, the total sample was 1278 employees. Regarding employees' gender, 45.2% of respondents were women, 54.8% were men. In terms of employees' age, 2.6% were 30 years old or less, 34.1% were between 31 and 40 years old, 46.9% were between 41 and 50 years old, 15.5% were over 50 years old (0.9% did not indicate their age). Regarding employees' marital status, 16% were single, 75.6% were married or had a partner, 0.3% were widows/ers, 7.2% were divorced or separated, and 0.9% did not answer. Related to their job position, 72.8% were working in the bank branch offices (24.1% managerial positions, 14.6% financial controllers, and 33.6% bank officers), 18.1% were technicians and banking managers, 2.6% were executive managers, 6.3% were middle managers, and 0.7% did not indicate their position.

#### 4.2. Measures

Barriers to women's promotion were measured through four dimensions from the TOP WOMAN scale [8].

- Unfair human resources policies and practices included four aspects of personnel policies and practices that can establish situations of gender-based discrimination. Example items are "women receive fewer training opportunities than men" and "women receive lower wages than men" ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ).
- Unequal performance appraisal included four items that address the existence of potential differences between men and women in the assessment of skills and performance and the level of demands placed on them, as well as the fact that women have to demonstrate their value and capacity more. Example items are "women need to prove their abilities more than men" and "women's work and achievements are less valued than men's" ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ).
- Barriers related to women's access to and participation in power and influential networks in the organization included six items, four related to the lack of female networks and two related to women's barriers to receiving mentoring. Example items in these dimensions are "women have less access to powerful groups and networks than men" and "there are no models of women managers that other women can follow" ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ).
- Barriers related to the work-life balance and family responsibilities included six items referring to organizational characteristics that complicate the work-family balance and impede women's job promotion because they have most of the family responsibilities. Example items are "the work-family balance affects women more than men" and "motherhood interrupts and delays women's opportunities for promotion" ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).
- Organizational justice was measured with a short nine-item scale adapted from the original scale developed by Colquitt [68], which included the following three items addressing each dimension: distributive (i.e., rewards in exchange for my work reflect the effort I made well), procedural (i.e., rules in the company are applied consistently), and interactional justice (my supervisor reasonably explains the rules and decision making). Cronbach's alpha for the overall score for organizational justice in our sample was 0.87.
- Organizational commitment was measured with a four-item affective dimension adapted from the Cook and Wall [56] measure. An example of an item is "I feel part of this organization" ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ).
- Self-perceived performance was measured by the six-item scale developed by Abramis [69]. The statement used to introduce the items was "In your last working month, to what extent did you satisfactorily perform the following tasks?" An example of an item is "perform without mistakes". Responses ranged from 1 (very unsatisfactorily) to 7 (very satisfactorily). Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.



Unless otherwise mentioned, all variables were measured on a seven-point Likert scale that expresses the degree of agreement with the statements, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. Items are available in Appendix A.

#### 4.3. Data Analysis

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the distinctiveness of the seven variables (unequal performance appraisal, barriers to accessing networks, barriers related to work–family balance, unequal HR practices and policies, organizational justice, organizational commitment, and self-perceived performance) included in the model. Weighted least squares means and variance adjusted (WLSMV) was chosen as the estimation method due to the large asymmetry and kurtosis of some items. We tested the fit of a seven-factor model and examined whether it fitted the data better than a one-factor model. This technique has also been widely used by researchers to address the issue of common method variance what has come to be called Harman’s one-factor (or single-factor) test [70].

To test differences between models and evaluate better fit, a modeling rationale was considered. Thus, for example, differences not larger than 0.01 between NNFI and CFI values ( $\Delta$ NNFI and  $\Delta$ CFI) are considered an indication of negligible practical differences [71,72].

To test the hypotheses involved in the proposed moderated mediation model, we used path analysis with Mplus [73]. Specifically, we chose robust maximum likelihood (MLR) as the method of estimation, considering the asymmetry and kurtosis of the outcome variables. To test indirect effects, we applied the bias-corrected (BC) bootstrap confidence interval (CI) method [74,75] as implemented in Mplus (e.g., [76]). Four indirect effects ( $a_k \times b_1 \times c_1$ ) were computed, where  $a_k$  is the coefficient that estimated the relationship between the barrier dimensions (unequal HR practices and policies ( $a_1$ ), unequal performance appraisal ( $a_2$ ), barriers to accessing influential and power networks ( $a_3$ ), barriers to work–family balance ( $a_4$ )), and organizational justice;  $b_1$  is the coefficient estimating the relationship between organizational justice and organizational commitment; and  $c_1$  is the coefficient estimating the corresponding relationship between organizational commitment and performance. If the BC bootstrap CI for the indirect effects ( $a_k \times b_1 \times c_1$ ) does not include zero, mediation is supported. To evaluate the statistical significance of the parameter estimates, we used one-tailed tests, which are suitable for directional hypotheses [77]; for the estimation of the statistical significance of the indirect effects, a CI 90% was used.

Finally, to test conditional indirect effects, we used BC bootstrap CI methods using a bootstrap sample size of 5000 [78]. According to Preacher et al. [78], the conditional indirect effects proposed in Hypothesis 6 can be estimated as the conditional product  $(a_k + a_5W) \times b_1 \times c_1$ , where  $5k$  are the coefficients estimating the moderator effect of gender in the relationship between each barrier and organizational justice,  $W$  is the moderator variable (gender), and the other coefficients ( $a_k \times b_1 \times c_1$ ) have the same meaning as described above. The conditional indirect effect will occur when the strength of the indirect effect ( $a_k \times b_1 \times c_1$ ) depends on the category (men vs. women) of the moderator variable ( $W$ ), that is, when the BC bootstrap confidence interval for the difference in the indirect effect ( $\text{diff\_IE}$ ) between the two levels of the moderator does not contain zero [78]. Thus, the coefficients of conditional indirect effects for the barriers were as follows: unequal HR practices and policies ( $a_51$ ), unequal performance appraisal ( $a_52$ ), barriers to access to power networks ( $a_53$ ), and barriers related to work–family balance ( $a_54$ ).

## 5. Results

The results of the CFA showed that the theorized seven-factor model fit the data well ( $\chi^2 = 6102.063$ ;  $df = 608$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; RMSEA = 0.083 (0.081–0.085); CFI = 0.957; TLI = 0.952), whereas the one-factor model exhibited a lack of fit ( $\chi^2 = 28,544.359$ ,  $df = 629$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; RMSEA = 0.185 (0.183–0.186); CFI = 0.779; TLI = 0.766). Considering the incremental

goodness of fit indices ( $\Delta\text{CFI} = 0.178$ ;  $\Delta\text{TLI} = 0.186$ ), the difference between the seven-factor model and the one-factor model was non-trivial. These results indicated that the seven-factor model showed better fit and supported the discriminant validity of the variables included in the model. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis), reliability (Cronbach's alpha value), and correlations between the variables included in the model are reported in Table 1.

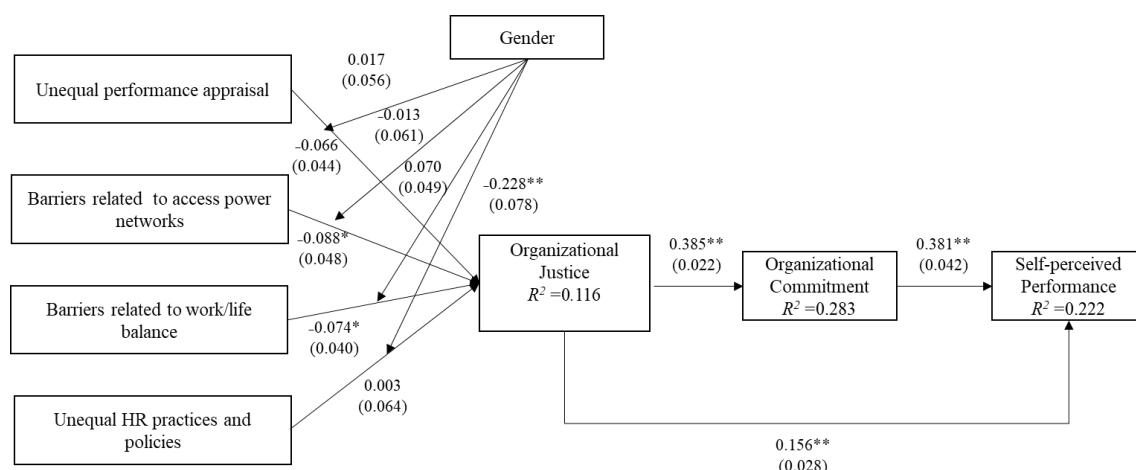
**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics, reliability, and correlations among the study variables.

	Range	Mean	SD	Sk	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Sex		0.45	0.50	0.19	−1.97								
2. Unequal Performance Appraisal	1–7	3.17	2.04	0.43	−1.22	0.48 **	(0.96)						
3. Barriers to access power networks	1–7	3.51	1.52	0.08	−0.84	0.34 **	0.66 **	(0.83)					
4. Barriers related to work–life balance	1–7	3.67	1.52	0.03	−0.87	0.16 **	0.33 **	0.48 **	(0.81)				
5. Unequal HR practices and Policies	1–7	2.27	1.37	0.96	0.09	0.37 **	0.73 **	0.61 **	0.29 **	(0.83)			
6. Organizational Justice	1–7	4.93	1.16	−0.46	−0.06	−0.05	−0.25 **	−0.27 **	−0.16 **	−0.27 **	(0.87)		
7. Organizational Commitment	1–7	6.20	0.84	−1.43	2.81	0.01	−0.18 **	−0.19 **	−0.15 **	−0.22 **	0.53 **	(0.75)	
8. Self-perceived Performance	1–7	5.54	0.94	−1.13	1.97	0.01	−0.15 **	−0.18 **	−0.11 **	−0.20 **	0.38 **	0.44 **	(0.88)

Note. Sk = skewness; K = kurtosis, N = 1278 Reliability (Cronbach's alpha value) appears on the diagonal in brackets.

The proposed moderated full mediation model (Figure 1) showed adequate fit to data ( $\chi^2 = 91.673$ ,  $df = 19$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; RMSEA = 0.055 (0.044–0.066); CFI = 0.907; TLI = 0.853; SRMR = 0.030), but the TLI showed values below the cut-off. Thus, based on the modification indices, we tested a partial mediation model (M2) where the path from organizational justice to self-perceived performance was added. To compare the alternative model's (M1 and M2) goodness of fit, incremental fit indices were estimated. The moderated partial mediation model (M2) showed a satisfactory fit to data ( $\chi^2 = 61.853$ ,  $df = 18$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; RMSEA = 0.044 (0.032–0.056); CFI = 0.953; TLI = 0.922; SRMR = 0.021), and the incremental fit indices ( $\Delta\text{CFI} = 0.046$  and  $\Delta\text{TLI} = 0.069$ ) showed relevant differences between the two nested models. Thus, we chose M2 as the best fitting model, and we interpreted the hypotheses based on the results of this model.

As Figure 2 shows, the paths from “unequal HR practices and policies” ( $a_1 = 0.003$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and “unequal performance appraisal” ( $a_2 = -0.066$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) to organizational justice were not significant. So, hypothesis 1a and 1d were not supported. However, the paths from “barriers to access to power networks” ( $a_3 = -0.088$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and “barriers related to work/life balance” ( $a_4 = -0.074$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) to organizational justice were negative and statistically significant. Hence, hypothesis 1b and 1c were supported. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. Additionally, organizational justice was positively and significantly related to organizational commitment ( $b_1 = 0.385$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and so Hypothesis 2 was supported. Moreover, organizational commitment was positively and significantly related to self-perceived performance ( $c_1 = 0.381$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), providing support for Hypothesis 3. Finally, the added path from organizational justice to self-perceived performance was statistically significant ( $B = 0.156$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Regarding the mediated effects, as Table 2 shows, some indirect effects of barriers to self-perceived performance through organizational justice and organizational commitment were statistically significant. Specifically, for barriers to accessing power networks and the work–life balance barriers, the BC bootstrap confidence intervals for the estimated indirect effects did not include the zero value at 90% CI [77]. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was partially supported.



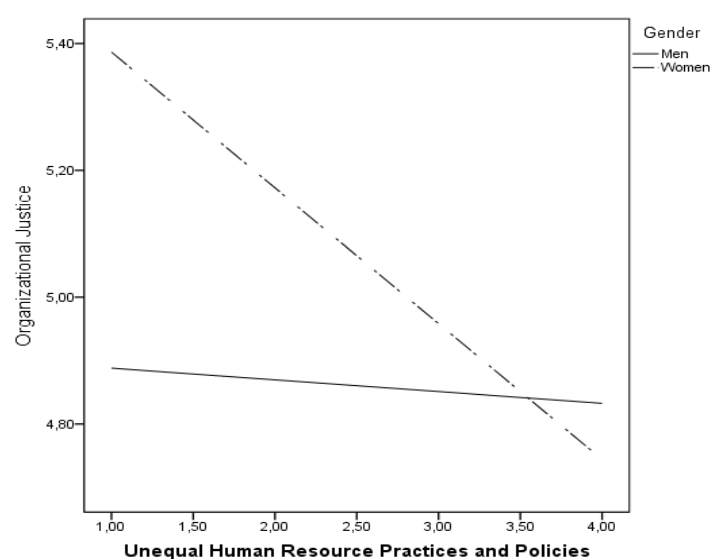
**Figure 2.** Parameter estimates for the moderated partial mediation model (M2). Note. Coefficients are unstandardized. Standard errors are in brackets. R2 represents the % of variance explained by the model for each endogenous variable. \*  $p < 0.05$  (one-tailed); \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (one-tailed).

**Table 2.** BC bootstrap confidence intervals for the indirect effects.

	Estimate	90% CI
Indirect effect ( $a_k \times b_1 \times c_1$ )		
Unequal performance appraisal	−0.010	[−0.022, 0.000]
Barriers to access to power networks	−0.013	[−0.025, −0.001]
Barriers related to work–life balance	−0.011	[−0.021, −0.001]
Unequal HR practices and policies	0.000	[−0.014, 0.017]

$n = 1272$ . BC = bias-corrected; CI = confidence interval;  $a_k$  = represents the corresponding coefficient between each barrier and justice ( $a_1, a_2, a_3, a_4$ );  $b_1$  = represents the corresponding coefficient between justice and commitment;  $c_1$  = represents the corresponding coefficient between justice and performance.

Results provided partial support for Hypothesis 5 because employees' gender only showed a significant moderator effect in the barriers–organizational justice relationship for one kind of barrier, as follows: “unequal HR practices and policies” ( $a_5 = -0.228, p < 0.01$ ). This significant interaction term indicates that the effect of barriers related to unequal HR practices and policies on organizational justice differs in women and men. To further interpret the interaction effect, we computed simple slopes of the relationship between “unequal HR practices and policies” and organizational justice (controlling the effect of the other three barriers included in the model) for each possible value of the moderator (0 = men, 1 = women) and plotted the corresponding regression lines (see Figure 3) by using the Process macro for SPSS [79]. Results showed that the slope estimating the relationship between “unequal HR practices and policies” and organizational justice was negative and significant for women (sex = 1;  $B = -0.21, p < 0.01$ ), but it was not significant for men (sex = 0;  $B = -0.02, p > 0.05$ ).



**Figure 3.** Relationship between unequal HR practices and policies and organizational justice as a function of gender.

Regarding the conditional indirect effects, results showed that “unequal HR practices and policies” had a negative and statistically significant indirect effect on self-perceived performance through organizational justice and commitment in women  $((a1 + a51W(1)) \times b1 \times c1 = -0.033$ ; 95% BC CI =  $[-0.050, -0.019]$ ) because the CI did not include zero. However, the aforementioned conditional indirect effect was not statistically significant in men  $((a1 + a51W(0)) \times b1 \times c1 = 0.000$ ; 95% BC CI =  $[-0.017, 0.020]$ ). These results partially supported Hypothesis 6.

In summary, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. H1b and H1c were supported, whereas H1a and H1d were not supported. Thus, only two of the studied barriers (barriers to access to power networks and barriers related to work–life balance) showed to be negatively associated with perceptions of organizational justice. Hypotheses 2 and 3 were supported, as employees’ perceptions of organizational justice was positively related to perceptions of organizational commitment, and this was positively related to self-perceived performance. According to the previous results, Hypotheses 4, was partially supported, as the double mediational chain proposed in the model was only supported for two of the studied barriers (barriers to access to power networks and barriers related to work–life balance). Hypothesis 5 was also partially supported, with gender showing a moderator role in the relationship between one of the barriers (barriers to unequal HR practices and policies) and organizational justice. Accordingly, Hypothesis 6 was partially supported, as the moderated mediation effect stated in this hypothesis only was supported for one out of four barriers (barriers of unequal HR practices and policies).

## 6. Discussion

The main purpose of the current study was to analyze the relationship between some types of barriers to women’s promotion and self-perceived performance, considering the mediator role of organizational justice and organizational commitment and the moderator role of employees’ gender. We hypothesized a moderated mediation model that included the relationships among these variables. Thus, our study contributes to understanding gender inequity in organizations and provides some arguments to eliminate the obstacles that most women face in their careers.

We considered four types of barriers that women can find when trying to access managerial positions. Our results reveal that employees who perceive that “barriers to accessing power networks” and “barriers related to work/life balance” are present in their organizations feel that the company is acting unfairly, and they develop perceptions of

organizational injustice. It is interesting to note that these two barriers reduce perceptions of organizational justice not only in women (the subject of these barriers), but also in men who witness these unfair practices and react with perceived injustice towards the company. In addition, there is another kind of barrier that affects organizational justice perceptions only in women (unequal HR practices and policies). Women who perceived that the company develops unfair HR practices showed a lower perception of organizational justice. In this case, men who perceived these unfair practices did not reflect this perception in their levels of perceived organizational justice. These results are congruent with the wide research evidence that points out the detrimental effects of unequal HR practices, the difficulties for women to access to influential network and difficulties that women experience to balance their work and life spheres [6,34,37,38]. In addition, they support social exchange theory statements [33] and specifically the research that links a differential treatment to some employees (women) regarding their colleagues (in this case, their male counterparts) with organizational (in)justice [39]. Women who find obstacles to their legitimate expectations to access managerial positions and receive a discriminated treatment from their company experience organizational injustice.

These results support ethical reasons to fight against barriers to women's promotion, and they provide evidence that these barriers are also detrimental to organizational outcomes that have an instrumental value for companies. In this regard, our results provide arguments about the sustainability of organizations in both social and economic terms. Organizational (in)justice is significantly related to organizational commitment and self-perceived performance (in this case, with a partially mediated effect through organizational commitment), according with previous evidence [44,47,49–51,55,58,80]. Therefore, by establishing obstacles to women's access to managerial positions, companies not only discriminate against women and exclude valued talent and competencies from managerial teams, but they also reduce feelings of organizational justice in both women and men employees in the company, which results in reduced commitment and self-perceived performance, among other outcomes. Thus, organizational sustainability is called into question.

Our results point out that there are different kinds of barriers to women's promotion that are clearly perceived by both men and women as unfair practices. Employees (both men and women) who perceive barriers to women's access to power networks and barriers related to work–life balance showed lower perceptions of organizational justice. In addition, women who perceived unequal HR practices and policies showed lower perceptions of organizational justice, but this relationship was not significant in men.

Nevertheless, “unequal performance appraisal” is not related to organizational justice perceptions. Although this lack of relationship is not surprising in men (who showed scores that were two points lower than women on this kind of barrier), it is counterintuitive in women. In women, “unequal performance appraisal” showed the highest score of all the barrier dimensions considered, whereas men perceived this dimension as the third-most present barrier in the company (women's mean = 4.29; men's mean = 2.32). However, these scores are not significantly related to organizational justice perceptions. The correlation coefficient between unequal performance appraisal and organizational justice is negative and significant (see Table 1), with a similar magnitude to other barriers. Thus, the variance in organizational justice explained by other kinds of barriers could make the variance explained by women's difficulties in being valued and recognized insignificant. This does not mean that unequal performance appraisal was not considered as a barrier for women promotion, as stated by previous research [30,35,36], but the effects of this kind of barriers on organizational justice seems to be subsumed by the effects of the other dimensions of barriers.

We hypothesized that barriers are more strongly related to organizational justice perceptions in women, as direct subjects of these barriers, than in men. Our results showed, however, that some barriers are detrimental to justice perceptions in women and men in the same terms. As social exchange theory has argued, unfairness to others affects

individual perceptions even when the person him/herself is not directly the target of these unfair practices, for instance, in psychological contract research [81]. However, gender moderates the direct relationship between one kind of barrier to women's promotion (unequal HR practices and policies) and organizational justice, and the indirect relationship between this barrier and self-perceived performance through organizational justice and organizational commitment. This partial support for Hypotheses 5 and 6 calls for further research to study the moderator role of gender in the relationships between organizational practices, organizational justice perceptions, and organizational outcomes.

Our results are consistent with a wide stream of research that links organizational (in)justice with decreased affective commitment towards the company and reduced self-perceived performance, among other organizational outcomes [44,47,49–51,55,56,58,80].

## 7. Conclusions

In sum, our results provide evidence about the direct relationships between different kinds of barriers to women's promotion to managerial positions ("barriers to accessing influential and power networks" and "barriers related to work/life balance") and organizational justice perceptions, as well as the indirect relationships between different kinds of barriers to women's promotion to managerial positions ("barriers to accessing networks" and "barriers related to work/life balance") and self-perceived performance through organizational justice and commitment. In addition, our results suggest that the existence of barriers to women's promotion affects organizational justice and organizational outcomes in the whole staff, beyond the people most directly affected by these barriers. Thus, eliminating gender inequity in organizations is a requirement to achieve not only social sustainability (as equitable development of every person in organizations), but also to achieve organizational sustainability in terms of sustained performance and profit.

### 7.1. Implications

Organizational sustainability requires ensuring present and future efficiency, in terms of both financial outputs (organizational performance) and social goals. Sustainable organizations should provide conditions to retain and care for their employees and ensure that their staff is in a good position (healthy, involved, and motivated) to contribute to the organizational progress. Equity is considered a current requirement for sustainable firms if they do not want to be subjected to public criticism and employee withdrawal. We present evidence supporting the need for companies to do their best to remove the barriers that impede the access of women to managerial positions. In addition to egalitarian and ethical principles of organizational behavior, barriers that affect the promotion of women are significantly related to the staff's organizational justice perceptions, and not only for women. Barriers to women's promotion go beyond the people who experience these difficulties, reducing the fairness perceptions of the witnesses of unfair practices. In addition, companies should be aware that such barriers, through their effects on organizational justice, have an effect on relevant organizational outcomes, especially organizational commitment (28.3% of variance explained by organizational justice) and self-perceived performance (22.2% of variance explained by the direct effect of organizational justice and the indirect effect through organizational commitment). Thus, organizations cannot allow practices that reduce women's fair access to career advancement to have this detrimental effect on the company outcomes. Our results call for a more agentic role of companies in dealing with different practices that preclude fairness, commitment, and performance in the whole staff, whether they are subject to unfair practices themselves or only witness these unfair practices towards others (women in this case). In sum, we provide evidence that barriers to women's promotion to managerial positions are detrimental to organizational sustainability, not only in social terms, but also in terms of outcomes related to productivity and efficiency.

Future directions could consider the differential effects of every kind of barriers for different dimensions of organizational justice. In addition, interventions to reduce the

existence of barriers for women's promotion and their effects on organizational justice and performance should be analyzed. Finally, a more nuanced analysis regarding the relevance of each kind of barriers regarding its prevalence and effects in a wider sample with several factors and from different countries would provide additional knowledge about this research topic.

## 7.2. Limitations

Our study has some limitations. First, our data come from only one financial group. Although the group is formed by three different firms, the results could rely on the particular conditions of this company. In particular, the organization was implementing their second equity plan when the sampling was carried out. In addition, in recent years, Spain has experienced a process of awareness regarding gender equity, which could make the overall society more sensitive to gender issues. Moreover, a more diverse sample (in terms of educational level, company size, sector, and jobs included) would provide greater insight about the validity and generalizability of our results.

Second, our study is cross-sectional, and all the variables were measured through self-reports, allowing for some risk of common-method variance. The results of the seven-factor CFA reduced this risk to a certain degree. Regarding causal relationships, although the theoretical considerations provide solid arguments for the proposed direction of the relationships, reciprocal relationships could not be completely ruled out (the more self-perceived commitment and performance, the less perception of inequity and lower perception of barriers). Thus, further research should analyze the sequence of the relationships among the study variables using longitudinal designs.

Finally, the barriers to women's promotion included in our study only predicted 11.6% of the variance in organizational justice. This means that other factors, apart from the four barriers considered, are influencing employees' justice perceptions. Other potential barriers to women's promotion could be considered, including aspects related to organizational culture, gender diversity in the managerial staff, or other aspects related to the glass ceiling (for instance, the banking sector could be considered a traditionally male-dominated sector, despite some recent changes). Nevertheless, when considering organizational justice, and especially when considering the overall staff (women and men), aspects other than gender equity could be relevant, such as fair HR practices (not only regarding gender balance), rewards and leadership, organizational climate, and inter-group relationships, or even comparisons with other referent groups and organizations (i.e., comparisons with companies from the same competence).

However, despite some limitations, our study contributes to the conversation about gender equity and sustainability. It provides relevant arguments and evidence to encourage companies to deal with the different kinds of barriers that exclude women from managerial positions, given that this discrimination has relevant (instrumental) costs for companies in terms of valuable organizational outcomes such as commitment and performance. Thus, gender inequity endangers both social and financial sustainability.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Items presented in the questionnaire.

Self-Perceived Performance (Abramis, 1994)
We now list some questions concerning your last working week. In your own judgement, how well did you fulfil the following tasks?
Make decisions?
Perform without mistakes?
Devote yourself to work?
Achieve your objectives?
Take initiatives?
Take responsibility?
Organizational Commitment (Cook & Wall, 1980)
Please state to what extent you agree with the following statements
To know that my own work had made a contribution to the good of the organisation would please me
I feel myself to be part of the organization
In my work, I like to feel that I am making some effort, not just for myself but for the organization as well
I am quite proud to be able to tell people who it is I work for
Organizational Justice (Colquitt, 2001)
Distributive Justice
Rewards (salary, bonus, etc.) that I get in return for my work reflect the effort I have put into my work
Rewards (salary, bonus, etc.) that I get in return for my work is appropriated for the work I have completed
Rewards (salary, bonus, etc.) that I get in return for my work reflect my contribution to the organization
Procedural Justice
Procedures that have been applied in my organization are free of bias
Procedures that are applied in my organization, allow to express your views when you do not agree with them
Procedures in my company are applied consistently
Interactional Justice
My direct supervisor treats me with respect
My direct supervisor is sincere with me
My direct supervisor reasonably explains me procedures and decision making
Top Woman (Ramos et al., 2021)
Barriers of Unequal performance appraisal
Women have greater requirements than men
Women are assessed with higher standards
Women need to prove their abilities more than men
Women's work and achievements are less valued than men's
Barriers to accessing influential networks



Women have less access to powerful groups and networks than men
Women move in groups with lower access to relevant information
Men in managerial positions prefer to work with other men
Powerful and influential groups and networks are composed of men
There are no models of women managers that other women can follow
Barriers to Work–life balance
Work schedules and work organization make women’s dedication to work difficult
Women put their family responsibilities before their professional ones
The work–family balance affects more women than men
Motherhood interrupts and delays women’s opportunities for promotion
Women’s family responsibilities make their career dedication and promotion difficult
Barriers of Unequal HR practices and policies
Women receive fewer training opportunities than men
Performance appraisal takes into account aspects that benefit men more than women
Women have more difficulties than men in being incorporated into the company
Women receive lower wages than men

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