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# SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION OF WOMEN IN SRI LANKA

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## ABSTRACT

*As a dynamic phenomenon, gender based violence cannot be identified only with physical and direct implications, since women are mostly exposed to ideological violence which is considered to be more indirect and disastrous. Therefore, the objective of the study is to understand how women's self-actualization within the public sphere is jeopardized due to implied cultural violence in specific social segments in Sri Lanka. Phenomenology was employed as the methodology and a case study was conducted. Two cases were used based on sociologically defined sectors\_ "Labukele Estate" in the Nuwara Eliya District and "Makulella Village" in the Badulla District. Focus group discussions and semi structured interviews were used to collect data. Data thus collected were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. The analysis reveals that; the less representation in the public sphere ( ex: being voiceless about their social situation and exclusion from culturally legitimized social setting) causes the distorted disposition of women thereby reducing the social development in Sri Lanka. And socially accepted habitus (World Vision) is culturally legitimized, though it is not individually legitimized. Differentiation of gender-based activities by emotional intensity, sectored differences among women within the same sphere, deprivation of relevant capabilities can be considered as the other factors conducive to the distorted disposition of women. Although as a part of SDGs ideological violence is set apart from social policies, it is to be considered that the implied cultural violence badly affects the disposition and self-actualization of women within the Public Sphere.*

**KEY WORDS:** SDGs, public sphere, structure, ideology, violence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concepts of "Human being" and "Person" hold different dispositions, although the concepts seem to be quite similar. The concept of 'human being' is identified with biological measures, whereas the concept of 'person' is defined by the culture. Social inequality, therefore, is an inevitable aspect of the society, regardless the natural equality the human beings are entitled.

Consequently, every society is composed of a stratification system which differentiates the people from being unified. Gender differentiation is a consequence of unavoidable stratification process of the society, and unlike many determinants of social stratification, gender is considerably associated with biological determinants thereby widening the social inequality, so that gender based violence is not just a result of social

disorganization, but a perilous result of the ideological positions of human beings.

Self-actualization, on the other hand, is an important aspect which leads the people towards their wellbeing. The wellbeing is defined as the balance development of psychological, social and biological aspects of a person. The life, therefore, is worthless unless the wellbeing is stabilized. The economic and social development is also highly influenced by the wellbeing. It is now clear that, there is a manifest relationship between development and self-actualization. Maslow, a prominent psychologist assumes 'self-actualization' as the people's transcendental or a higher need which can be achieved after being sufficiently gratified the basic needs (1956). Self-actualization is a process whereby differentiating potentialities inherent in the makeup of the individual and, become possible only when people receive positive regard from others and learn to think positively of themselves, Rogers argues in contrast (Rogers, 1980). As opposed to Maslow, Roger manifests some societal features of self-actualization, hence women's self-actualization and disposition is related here mostly with the Rogers' argument. Self-actualized people are believed to be stable in both psychologically and socially (Maslow, 1956).

Self-actualization varies in accordance with the gender identity which is socially constructed. The place of an individual within a specific field or a society is known as "Disposition" (Bourdieu, 1977). The Disposition or "Habitus" is defined as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organized practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them" (Bourdieu, 1990). He argues that habitus allow individuals to find new solutions/roles to new situations/statuses based on their social situation and experiences. The women's disposition is an important aspect when the self-actualization is considered. The disposition as a social fact among other societal aspects is influenced by the gender identity.

Violence against women is identified and discussed here, using the above perspectives in relation to *specific social segments*. Specific social segment is a part of the main society, yet it represents some unique characteristics and identity, such as estate sector in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it is really difficult to describe a society as a complete or a single unit, since it is composed of socially constructed or geographically identified segments. Even the women of a particular country cannot be considered as a single unit, because the abstract concept of 'women' also does not represent some

segments of the society. Violence against women is placed somewhere in the society with rigorous complexities. However, in this analysis we try to understand the phenomenon with special reference to *specific societal segments* in Sri Lanka.

A society is not only identified as a mixture of several strata, but also as a union of two spheres, namely Public sphere and Private sphere (Habermas, 1989). Habermas uses the concept to describe communicative action in modern societies (1989), however some radical feminists argue that public and private worlds of the women are maintained a patriarchy, and male control over the spheres must be eliminated if women are to be liberated (Millett, 1970). The public sphere is defined as "a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interests and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them" (Hauser, 1999, p. 61). Habermas defines the public sphere as "sphere of public authority, which is dealt with the state, or realm of the police and the ruling class. Through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of the society" (1989, p. 31). The public sphere and the public opinion has a constant relationship and the public sphere is often driven by the accumulated different public opinions. The public opinion is made up of people's sentiments. As noticed, the public sphere is comprised of public institutions and ideologies followed by the public opinion. The public opinion which is believed to be a result of peoples' sentiments is more often influenced by ideologies and practices of gender stratification system of the society.

Even though, it is difficult to use some definitions to understand human behavior and culture in postmodern societies, at the beginning of anthropology culture was identified as "[a] complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1958, p. 6). Recently some sociologists define culture in consistent with present societal situation as "a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour" (Oatey, 2008, p. 3). As with the latest identification of culture, violence might be defined as a culturally derived pattern of behaviour.

The 'Missing Women' concept shows a different angle of gender based violence, and for the first time, Amartya Sen emphasized the argument (1999). Substantial percentage of women in most of the countries has been missing due to gender selective social practices. Being disappeared from the public sphere just does not

imply the death of women, but in many societies women have been missing, because their voice appears to be quite little or the opinion is ignored. The real opinion and the voice is not presented in the public sphere, even though it has to be. Therefore, being voiceless in the public sphere is a consequence of *implied cultural violence*.

Violence in relation to women has defined; “any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (WHO, 2016). Therefore, as a dynamic phenomenon, violence cannot be confined only into physical and direct implications, since women are mostly exposed to ideological violence which is believed to be more indirect and disastrous. If the violence against women is culturally defined, accepted or aroused, the situation can be identified as “Implied Cultural Violence”. Women’s disposition in both public and private life has exposed to several perilous situations due to culturally implied violence, consciously or unconsciously.

Even in developed countries, despite the economic development and social stability, women are exposed to ideological violence than direct violence (Goldberg, 2010), so that women’s disposition cannot be considered equal and just. Mostly in developed countries poverty is considered as a high risk factor for women and their self-actualization (Goldberg, 2010). Therefore, when policies are compiled aiming at alleviating gender based violence, structural patterns and cultural determinants must be taken into consideration, immensely.

New explanation for the concept of violence was introduced in 90’s as opposed to the traditional arguments. Hochschild was the person who raised the theoretical debate, and argues that “both men and women do emotion work, in private life and at work” (1983, p. 162), but that “Our culture invites women, more than men, to focus on feeling rather than action” (1983, p. 57). There is a socially and culturally structured, gendered specialization – a division of labour – in emotion work. Women are more responsible for smiling, being nice, celebrating others, empathizing with others, whereas men are expected to do the aggressive emotional tasks (1983, pp. 163–165). Hochschild describes, women, because of their subordination to men in a patriarchal society, tend to have a “weaker ‘status shield’ against the displaced feelings of others” (1983, p. 163). Hence, they are more likely than men to be the object of emotional ridicule and attack, simply the implied cultural violence.

In 1981, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) stressed the violence against women is

not just a result of maladjustment of human interactions, but as a result of no say in public and private lives of the women’s life world (CEDAW, 1981). In order to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, CEDAW argues that it is essential to strengthen the participation of women in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government (CEDAW, 1981, p. 3). Participation of women in the public life will be resulted in stable disposition and self-actualization.

Recently the Agenda of Sustainable Development Goals was declared as the policy endeavor for the next 15 years, and violence against women was considered as a problem to be alleviated substantially thereby engendering the gender equality. The 5<sup>th</sup> of the 17 goals acclaims that “Gender equality and women’s empowerment have advanced in recent decades. Girls’ access to education has improved, the rate of child marriage declined and progress was made in the area of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, including fewer maternal deaths. Nevertheless, *gender equality remains a persistent challenge for countries worldwide and the lack of such equality is a major obstacle to sustainable development*” (UNESCO, 2012, p. 8). Importantly the report argues that the violence against women and girls would violate their human rights and hinders development. Probably, self-actualization of the women is more often regarded sustainable, if it is associated with the human rights.

Statistical reports are more likely to be favored and used, as far as the compiling policies aiming at gender equality are considered, since they are appeared to be accurate and precise. However, they are particularly unable to demonstrate the complexities of women’s lives (Ferraro, 2008). Cultural patterns and implications related to women’s disposition are unable to be demonstrated to a quite certain extent by statistical reports, so that a critical and quite deep-qualitative explanation is needed to reveal the real situation, thereby supporting the sustainable life for women. Some argue that the life of women in the public sphere may be strengthened using institutional interventions as an innovative approach to reduce gender based violence (Hilliard, Bukusi, Grabe, & Dworkin, 2016). Hilliard et al. conducted a research in rural Kenya in order to reveal the culturally implied violence in the public sphere and specified that all of the interviewees in the sample who experienced violence during disinheritance, asset stripping, or property grabbing processes report the cessation of violence when they reported property rights violations to the particular programme (CWDG) initiated (Hilliard et al., 2016). However, the situation may be different in other countries, including Sri Lanka.

## 2. THE OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of the study is to understand the ways in which women's self-actualization within public sphere is jeopardized due to implied cultural violence in specific social segments with special reference to Sri Lanka.

The study holds a constructive epistemological consideration and followed by phenomenological implications. Since the gender based violence is best be described in relation to particular experiences aroused through peoples meaningful interactions, here Phenomenology was employed as the methodology. With the intention of understanding the reality relevant to the objective, Case Study is used as the method. Two cases (societal sectors) were selected and each one of them is comprised of 3 focus group discussions and 7 semi structured interviews. Two cases were based on sociologically defined sectors\_ "Labukele Estate" in Nuwaraeliya District and "Makulella Village" in Badulla District. "Labukele" is an estate in Nuwaraeliya district, on the contrary "Makulella" is a pheasant society in Badulla district, hence both of them are held different societal characteristics and positions (Estate sector can be identified specifically to the pheasant or village community). Data thus collected were analyzed using the thematic analysis and triangulation.

## 3. ANALYSIS

In the analysis it is argued that the self-actualization of women is jeopardized substantially due to implied cultural violence with special reference to specific societal segments in Sri Lanka.

Women have been excluded from opportunities for the investment. Investment or putting capital of any kind in a manner consistent with provident vision would be the foremost cause of sustainable life. It is, therefore, believed that the prosperity of the people is highly depended on the infrastructural development and stability of the life. The term 'Infrastructure' does not imply only the material development, but also the social development. Therefore, the opportunities for the investment is of vital importance, since it is associated with the freedom of life. Freedom of the life is highly determined by the economic freedom in which the people are perceived. Male are appeared to be more open and free, since the economic freedom they are composed of. In the case of women's disposition and self-actualization, distortion may be the result through absence of the economic freedom. Women are more likely to be excluded from the opportunities of investment. This can be considered as a gendered exclusion from the market.

Socially and culturally, women are considered to be a group with inability to sustain in investing any kind of capital. As identified, many

of the regional banks reluctant to grant loan facilities to the women, since they inherently believe that "women would not succeed". Negative thoughts toward women are culturally accepted and legitimized. Being excluded from the main stream opportunities, women are more in to accept the situation as normal and legitimized by themselves, unconsciously. Theoretically definable violence is apparent in the situation, but in the real life it is often implied and not visible. Because of the exclusion from the market thereby constraining women into the investment and economic sustainability, self-actualization is endangered. And the disposition of women is distorted, since their voice is not present in the public sphere, even though it must be presented. Though the women are physically represented in the life world, their voice and ideology has been missing.

Gender difference of decision making power has been widely discussed in the literature, although some of the important aspects are not taken into consideration. In the study, power is identified as the ability to control something or someone without any other hindrances. Probably, the ability to take decisions on any expected result is of vital importance, since the self-actualization and the sustained disposition is lied on the decision making power. However, women are not appeared to be comprised of decision making power despite having some other types power. Even though counter argument can be raised too, agriculture and family management activities are dominated by the women to some certain extent. However, most important power (Decision Making) which makes the women more self-actualized has been missing.

As a matter of fact, women's ideology or the presented opinion is more likely to be funneled by the male dominance. Therefore, the real expectations of women are not presented in the public sphere. The real intention of which to be presented to the public sphere has then probably been reinterpreted giving completely different opinion, because of the funneling process. And it seems to be accepted and legitimized by the cultural practices and beliefs. For example, here excerpted a portion from a focus group discussion. (Consider that the discussion proceeds in the given order)

*Woman: "We have been facing many problems; I cannot even wash my daughter's clothes. Not only that, just look at the water tank... how can we consume it... it is not possible to drink... water is completely full of chlorine... we never used to the water with chlorine... water is a substantial part of our life... our everyday life depends on the water..."*

*Man A: "exactly, sir. We have been facing serious problems... we cannot use the water provided by the local*

government. We never used to it. Earlier, we used the natural water for our cultivation purposes. Now it is not possible. Provided water is not sufficient even for the everyday activities, so how can we use them in the fields (agricultural activities)...”

Man B: “We were given a promise that someday this problem would end. Until the problem is solved, we shall consume the water with chlorine. Yes.... Just think we would do it...! Do you think that it would be a long lasting answer? I think it is just a plaster. Government must give us an acceptable answer. They should take a necessary administrative (political) action. Now we are trying to organize community based organization in order to force the government to take a necessary remedial action...”

Position of the women in the above discussion is completely different to the Man A and B. Explanations of the catastrophic situation provided by Man A and B hold different positions. Problems related to agricultural activities are emphasized in the excerpt A, and which is aroused through the explanation of woman. When the discussion is progressed Man B intervened and gave another opinion about the catastrophe which is more into political matters. The idea provided by the woman on the matter of water has been changed into another opinion by the A’s intervention and differently identified, unconsciously. On the other hand, the problem raised by the woman has mostly been converted into another position by the B’s intervention. Therefore, the woman’s idea was funneled and resulted in another male dominant ideology. Even though the women are presented in the public sphere, it cannot be considered as an active representation, hence they have been missing in the public sphere, unconsciously. Without keen explanation and analysis the ideology or the expectations of women are hardly to be explained as in the above case.

Family obligations of women and obligation related norms are widely accepted and legitimized by the society. Legitimization of a particular norm is not just a spontaneous incident, but it takes quite a long time to justify the norm as an acceptable principle for everyone who is supposed to share a common culture. Family norms and obligations are organized with a critical consideration of gender roles. Therefore, the protection of a family from any calamity is bounded to the women. Although the responsibility of family relations is loaded on the women and this argument can often be accepted or legitimized in Sri Lanka, the issue has always been laid in the freedom and sacrifice. Sacrifice of the freedom of

women for the sake of her family members is considerably appreciated by the culture, and even the deep rooted laymen literature also supported the argument, and hence women are unconsciously bound to the fact and ridiculously some may argue it as a result of ignorance. However, the study reveals that the freedom and self-actualization of women is considerably threatened due to the family norms and obligations specifically in extreme cases, and is often not possible to be generalized. The nature of family norms and obligations are different in each case.

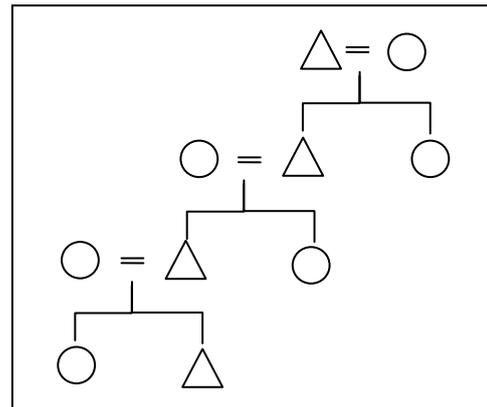


Figure No 1: Ideal structure of a family, Labukele Estate

Unlike modern day rural or urban families, estate sector families are different in its organization and structure. Because of the early marriage and some other behavioral patterns, at least one family can be comprised of three generations. Male members of a family are often engaged in estate sector activities and most of the women as well. Role of the women in estate sector has become doubled, because of their family obligations and estate work load. It is possible to be legitimized or justified the family obligation within the cultural context, but the extensive burden of the family maintenance becomes a responsibility of the women. Extensive burden of the family will be resulted in the lack of capabilities and male favourism. Because of the excessive burden, family members including women are prone to contemplate the importance of male as income generators or economic stabilizers. Therefore, the women’s involvement is not sufficiently represented in the private life.

As the family tree illustrated above, here it should mainly focus on the women who are placed in the first generation and the last (considered) generation. They are more often not engaged in income generation activities, sometimes first generation may be, however it cannot be considered sufficient when compared to the second and third generations. As a result, the maintenance

burden of the family is excessively high in the middle layers, particularly in reference to women. The situation is quiet complex, and also not considered as violence, but here it can be identified as a kind of violence, culturally implied, so the self-actualization of women has been threatened unknowingly.

The women are confined into the place already they have been living, and excluded from the external environment. For example, most of the women do not have any contacts or ties with the city. The city or town is considered to be a place where the agricultural products are marketed. Male obviously have contacts with the city, since they are engaged in agricultural and some state sector activities. As an exceptional case, sometimes it can be identified some of the women are engaged in state sector jobs, however it is not the common situation within the considered arena. Exclusion from the external environment can be considered as a deprivation of a particular capability. The contacts with external environment and among themselves in which the women can use as a capital may be a cause of high social development (Putnam, 2000). However, in the area studied, most of the women are confined only into the village or estate, and they are not actively participated in external (City or Town) contacts. Therefore, the information flow has been congested, and ignorance will be the result. Women of the considered areas would not be possible to empower in the mean of self-mobilization which is thought to be a way towards the self-actualization.

Culture is possibly engaged in determining gender roles, consistent with labour intensity. However, fascinatingly it is realized that the gender roles between male and female are differentiated not only because of the required labour intensity, but because of the emotional intensity. Job roles are organized apparently based on labour intensity, however emotional intensity is implied. In general, women's activities are recognizably different that of men's. Laymen would argue, it is because of the labour intensity of each activity required. For example, plucking tea leaves is assigned to women and some hard works like spreading fertilizers are allocated explicitly to men. Apparently it seems that the job roles are decided based on intensity (hardness or softness) of the required labour. On the other hand wages paid for a particular job role is depended clearly on the prejudiced decisions about required intensity. Activities or jobs performed by women are more often regarded as soft, and very hard is for men. Therefore, women have been underpaid when compare to men. Most of the roles and activities of the public sphere are arranged based on the emotional intensity, including family obligations and work place job roles. There has been a constant imbalance among men and women, as far as the wage rates are considered, especially in informal

sector. Therefore, women's self-actualization is being jeopardized while widening the negative disposition of women.

*"I'm a **housewife** and don't do any **job**. But I have to go to the field (place where the agricultural lands are located) to do several activities. My husband cannot do everything alone, so I have to **help** him. Therefore, I'm quite busy in day times. Sometimes, I just prepare food parcels and sell them in the school premises. Then I can earn some amount of money, but it is **unstable**. As a **practice** I'm the one who wash clothes of members in the family... I don't think that my husband would engage in washing clothes"*

The importance of any activity/job performed by a person is hardly to be conceptualized. In rural areas, women themselves would not be able to understand importance of jobs/activities they perform. As illustrated in the above excerpt, activities performed by the female are perceived as "help, practice, not job, unstable". Unstable perception of activity is rather important, since it implies the stability of the activities of men. Probably the activities/jobs performed by female are not considered as jobs, but just as activities to be compulsorily performed (they are culturally legitimized). And the emotional or mostly so called "soft labour" is thought be associated with female works/activities, including preparing food, washing clothes, sewing etc. In the mainstream discourse or theories, these activities have been identified consistent with labour intensity, but not the emotional intensity.

Role differentiation would lead to gender based violence, since its inherent emotional intensity. Besides psychological dimension, emotional intensity is determined by the cultural values. Even though, the hardness or softness of an activity is determined by material measures, the cultural measures play an important and unavoidable role. For example, "Child rearing, preparing foods" are thought to be some of the activities in which an emotional intervention is required. Therefore, men have been excluded or put aside from those activities thereby assigning some activities in which the emotional intervention is assumed to be not needed. As a matter of fact, softness has probably been overpowered by the hardness; therefore, the self-actualization of women has been neglected consciously or unconsciously.

Theories generated cannot be generalized due to relativeness of the self-actualization and the disposition, according to the place where women have been living. Conceptualization of self-actualization in an estate is quite different from a village. Considering the relativistic perspective,

some may try to analyze the situation of women in accordance with the cultural values and principles, and also it seems to be justifiable. If someone argues that the “women of estate sector should understand according to estate-culture, and the village women through village-culture”, apparently it seems justifiable and rather correct. However, there can be culturally justifiable norms and practices and they are male biased, but not conducive to the betterment of the women. Although there can be a kind of relativeness among different sectors, universal human rights cannot be interpreted in line with specific cultural implications. Self-actualization based on the basic human needs must be achieved so as to strengthen the sustainable development, irrespective of the gender difference.

Culturally legitimized norms always would not be able to justify as acceptable by way of individual perception. Even though some of the practices and norms are culturally legitimized and socially accepted, they might not be legitimized individually. Gender based violence, here understood as a hidden concept lay between cultural legitimization and individual legitimization. They are mutually exclusive, and as a result more often women tend to accept and accede with the culturally legitimized norms and practices, regardless of the individual implication, partly because of the powerlessness in decision making and ignorance.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Violence directed towards women has to be reinterpreted going away from conventional definitions and interpretations, since the society has changed remarkably. Irrespective of the various interpretations, gender based violence has been identified as a negative force towards the wellbeing of women. Because of the male biased social institutions and interpretations, women are being excluded or neglected from the mainstream social regard. As a matter of fact direct or physical, psychological and sexual violence are considered mostly harmful and prevalent among many different countries including Sri Lanka. However, here it is argued that the culturally implied violence against women is of vital importance, since the influence is rather hazardous. Therefore, any activity or practice which is conducive to the distortion of the women’s disposition is considered here as a form of violence. And based on that assumption, it is strived to understand how women’s self-actualization within public sphere is jeopardized due to implied cultural violence in specific social segments in Sri Lanka.

Implied cultural violence is consciously or unconsciously prevalent in the society and has resulted in powerlessness in decision making, male biased family norms and obligations, sacrifice of expectations for the sake of the others, capability deprivation, organization of the roles in line with

emotional labour concept and the kind. And women are more likely to be excluded from the opportunities of investment. This can be considered as a gendered exclusion from the market. Especially, the studied women not appear to be comprised of any decision making power despite the fact that they are of course having power of any kind except the decision making. On the other hand, women’s ideology or the presented opinion has probably been funneled by the male dominance. The situation is quiet complex, and also not considered as violence, but here it is argued as a kind of violence, culturally implied, so the self-actualization of women has been threatened unknowingly.

As a part of SDGs recently, ideological violence is set apart from social policies. However, it is to be considered that the implied cultural violence badly affects the disposition and self-actualization of women in the life world including private and public spheres. Even though women must to be represented in the public sphere, they have been missing or disappeared, not only because of the direct violence, but because of the implied cultural violence. And distorted disposition will be the uppermost among perilous consequences. Therefore, as far as the social policies aimed at wellbeing of the women are considered, impact of implied cultural violence should be taken into clear consideration.

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