

**FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY IN KENYA: THE CASE OF ABAGUSII AND AGIKUYU
WOMEN OF KENYA****James Gichuru Kariuki**

Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses factors behind the overrepresentation of women among the poor in Kenya. Focusing on the Abagusii and Agikuyu women, the paper argues that poverty has acquired a feminine face meaning that it is more of women issue than men's. The paper notes that the social distance between men and women is narrowing but a lot still needs to be done to reduce the poverty gap. There are several factors behind the social distance. These include socialization, power asymmetries in the institution of marriage, Female Genital Mutilation, Gender Based Violence, patriarchy, education opportunities, the growth of female-headed households and politics. The writers argue that poverty reduction programmes need to focus on understanding the underlying causes of poverty among women in Kenya. Then programmes can be initiated to address the structural factors behind it. The paper therefore suggests appropriate interventions to address the feminization of poverty. They include the need for increased civic awareness and women empowerment in order to spur socio-economic development.

Key Words: *Feminization of poverty, Abagusii, Agikuyu, Women of Kenya*

Introduction

Poverty is one of the major factors affecting the quality of life of the people of developing countries like Kenya. The country is putting efforts to improve its infrastructure, systems of governance, systems of education, human capacity, economic capacity and health care. All these efforts are meant to ensure an improvement in the quality of life of the Kenyan citizens. The Kenyan society is comprises of men, women and children who are all affected by poverty. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that among the Abagusii and Agikuyu communities of Kenya poverty affects women more than men such that poverty is poverty has acquired a feminine face. This paper therefore explores poverty and its relationship to women in the two communities.

According to Jodie Martin (2008), article on *Feminization of Poverty: Women Constitute the Majority of the World's Poor*, she says that; "70 per cent of the world's poor are women. The majority of the 1.5 billion people living on \$1 a day or less are women. The gap between men and women caught in the cycle of poverty has continued to widen in recent years. This alarming trend is referred to as 'the feminization of poverty'".

According to the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, women living in poverty are often denied access to critical resources such as credit, land and inheritance. Their labour goes unrewarded and unrecognized. Their health care and nutritional needs are not given priority, they lack sufficient access to education and support services, and their participation in decision-making at home and in the community are minimal. Caught in the cycle of poverty, women lack access to resources and services to change their situation.

Definition of concepts

Poverty

Poverty refers to insufficiency of resources on which to live. Therefore it is the state of not having basic needs of life such as food, clothing, housing, education and health care. Poverty leads to the state of being without enough money or resources to live at a standard considered normal or basic by society. It can be used to describe varying states of need, from lack of material comfort to near-starvation. These varying levels of poverty are; **Destitution** is poverty that is so extreme as to be life-threatening; **Indigence** a formal word used to describe a state of very severe poverty; **Deprivation** a state of severe poverty, emphasizing the fact that those affected have been denied the material benefits that others enjoy; **Penury** a fairly severe state of economic need; **Social exclusion** used in political or sociological contexts to suggest a lack of money or resources sufficient to sustain a basic standard of living, causing those affected to be disadvantaged.

Feminization

Feminization is a shift in gender roles and sex roles in a society, group, or organization towards a focus upon the feminine. This is the opposite of a cultural focus upon masculinity. It can also mean the incorporation of women into groups or a professions or roles that was once dominated only by men.

Feminization of Poverty

Feminization of Poverty means less income for females than males in the labour market. The feminization of poverty helps one understand that poverty may be an issue due to gender inequality in the Society. For example, female single headed households seem to be facing more severe poverty than male single headed families and male headed households. In other words poverty develops a feminine face as it becomes more of a women issue than men's. Thus men are less ravaged by poverty compared to women.

Factors causing Feminization of Poverty among Abagusii and the Agikuyu communities

There are several factors causing feminization of poverty in Kenya and specifically among the Abagusii and the Agikuyu of Kenya. These are:

Socialization practices

Men in these communities have been socialized that the woman is at the peripheral of decision making. Therefore in most cases, men can't contemplate a decision made by a woman. The woman finds herself at the wrong end of some of the decisions made by men. She is not a participant. For example among both the Abagusii and the Agikuyu a woman cannot decide to sell her cow to meet her needs. A man needs to be consulted somewhere. This therefore perpetuates poverty among the

women. Women are socialized that there are separate roles for men and women. Women's roles are domestic based. She can't venture out.

Power Asymmetries in the Institution of Marriage

Traditionally the marriage set up was such that a woman had to wait for a marriage proposal from a man. This was disadvantageous to the woman. Sometimes she could not freely choose her marriage partner but had to get a husband chosen by the elders. This was very dangerous because the woman and the man did not get to know each other well before marriage. There was no time for courtship. The woman lived a life of servitude to the husband. There were also cases of underage girls being married to wealthy old men. This meant that girls dropped out of school leading to increase of illiteracy levels for women. Thus, from the time formal education was brought by the colonialists among the two communities, men had an advantage over women in terms of accessibility to education.

Today a lot has been achieved towards realization of accessibility of education for the girl child. However, girls are still more likely to drop from school than boys. In addition, marriage is still disadvantageous to the woman because she starts playing the twin maternal role of child birth and child rearing. She has no time to engage in other productive activities. She may sometimes be perpetually pregnant or tending to her children.

Among the Abagusii and Agikuyu, it is the woman who leaves her family to join the man. This means that the woman ventures into an 'unknown world'. In most cases the married woman does not inherit anything from her parents. However, her male siblings are entitled to inheritance. This is a major cause of poverty among women.

The institution of marriage favours men by allocating them more power than women. This is achieved through the exchange of dowry where the man gains control over the woman's productivity and reproductive capability. This is sometimes seen particularly by feminists as a commoditisation of women where they are turned into commodities transferable in the market. The man who pays the dowry (in the past in form of livestock but today largely in terms of money) now "owns" the woman because she is like an asset purchased in the market. This leads to abusive marriages and other violations women encounter in marriages. Women have been socialized that to be married, dowry has to be paid. It has now become common among the Agikuyu women to contribute money through merry go round groups and pay dowry to their parents if the husband does not pay. This is now a very common behaviour commonly known as *kamweretho* a kikuyu term literally meaning 'explain to them'. In other words they are trying to explain to men that there is need to pay dowry and 'if the husband is not man enough to pay' they can as well pay for themselves. An Agikuyu woman can work so hard for a very long period of time in order to do a *kamweretho*. Some gains have been made though. For instance there are cases where among the Abagusii dowry is paid to women in case the husband is dead or in case the wife is regarded as being more responsible than the husband. This is a practice that was never accepted in the past.

It is ironical that women perceive marriage as the only medium through which they can access resources, while in reality marriage may perpetuate poverty. In some cases women do not control the number of children they have. Instead they have unplanned pregnancies in marriage because the man does not care about family planning. On the positive side, this is changing as women are increasingly embracing the use of contraceptives with or without the support of husbands. This is an indicator that women are increasingly becoming aware of their reproductive rights.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

This refers to female circumcision that includes a range of practices involving the complete or partial removal or alteration of the external sexual organs for non-medical reasons. These involve the clitoris, *labia majora* and *labia minora*. FGM is carried out at infancy, before puberty, at puberty (accompanied by initiation rites, although not always), after birth of first child or during pregnancy (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund, 2000).

FGM is associated with Islam or patriarchy. It is meant to 'purify' or 'tame' a woman's sexuality. This works to the benefit of men and to the disadvantage of women. It has substantial negative health, psychological and physical effects on woman. The women may have low self esteem which may affect the productivity and socialization ability due to things taught through the initiation rites' stage. They are taught to avoid free socialization with men. They cannot enter into business contracts with men freely. They have to watch over their backs to fend off fellow women (or even other men) getting to know of any association with men who are not their husbands or relatives. This leads to isolation of women and can contribute substantially to feminization of poverty because women lack certain rights which can contribute to income generating activities. FGM is also meant to "put women where they belong" in the Society. They are like second class citizens after men. Statistics show that 50% of Kenyan women undergo FGM. Among the Agikuyu a lot of gains have been made in dealing with FGM. However there are fears that the practice is slowly coming back due to two reasons. One is the *mungiki* factor. The *mungiki* a cult like organisation that urges the Agikuyu people to go back to their old cultural practices is known to advocate for FGM. Secondly, there have been some arguments especially in the rural areas that women who are not circumcised are more promiscuous and are likely to spread HIV-AIDS. Thus some people believe that FGM is good as it is likely to control sexuality of the girls and women. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Abagusii cult-like groups particularly *chinkororo* and *sungu sungu*. Among the Abagusii it is believed that a real man should not marry a woman who is not circumcised. Indeed such a woman is referred in derogatory language as *egesagane*. Girls among the Abagusii demand circumcision because of the fear of stigmatisation and fear of the possibility that they may not get a husband if they do not undergo FGM. Such cultural practices are meant to subjugate women and therefore they perpetuate poverty.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Despite the talk about human rights and a new political dispensation aimed at eliminating all forms of violence and advancing the status of women, there does not appear to be corresponding change. Not only is violence against women heightening, it is widening and deepening at all levels of society in many parts of Africa. Women not only suffer immeasurable violence in the region, they are deliberately targeted for harm, ridicule and torture. Women's bodies have become objects of attack every day. Women and men are both victims of gender violence contrary to the misconception that only women suffer irreparable damage from this inhuman act. However, there seems to be more emphasis on Violence against women because in most cases women are the victims while men are the perpetrators of violence. This does not mean that violence against men is not evident if the media reports in the country are anything to go. Violent acts against women affects all irrespective of race, age, income, or social status.

As we have pointed out earlier in this discussion, payment of dowry makes women become assets for men. This perpetuates gender violence against women. They are forced to submit to the "divinely commanded need to be attached to a man where they need to be submissive always."

GBV affects the family because women cannot become effective mothers and wives under the constant threat of violence. Self-defence and fear becomes a real pre-occupation. It also leads to break up of marriages hence the women's access to life-sustaining resources is terminated. More so, the Abagusii and Agikuyu communities are both hostile divorcees and the blame is placed on the woman. This is one of the reasons why a spouse sticks in an abusive marriage. GBV occurs in a cyclical pattern (see figure 1) and can begin at any time in a relationship including during dating and can continue throughout the marriage.

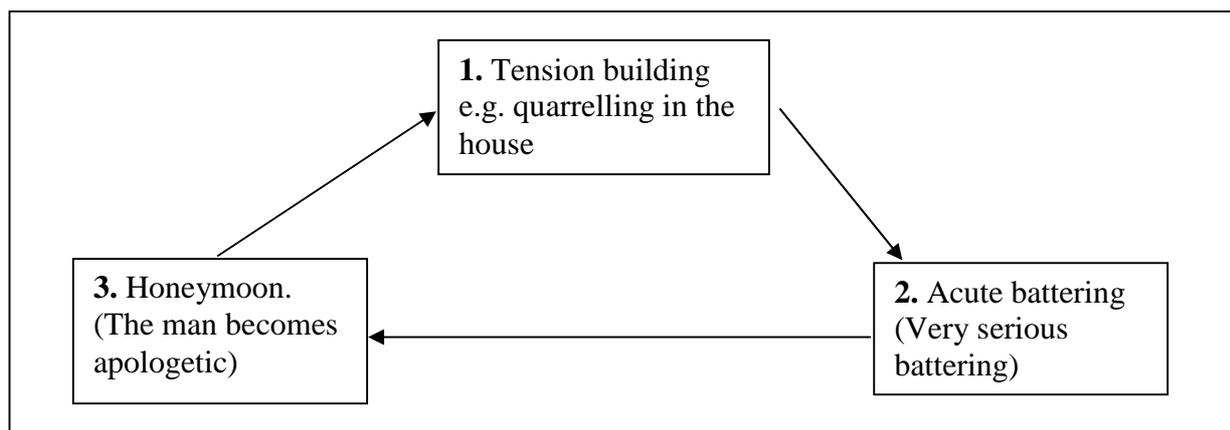


Figure 1: The cycle of Gender Based Violence. It is a vicious cycle where no option of either divorce or sticking to marriage is out rightly beneficial to the abused spouse

A woman who is battered may not be free to make decisions because of fear of that the husband will explode into angry modes and beat her. Such decisions might involve sourcing for the best market for her produce, leaving the child under someone's care to attend a women welfare group meeting, or buying a radio/ TV to catch up with the current affairs or exchanging a goat with a bag of maize without the man's authority. GBV also leads to physical injuries like burning of her body, broken limbs or sustaining permanent disabilities like blindness or even death. These injuries immensely affect a woman productivity leading to Feminization of Poverty in Kenya. Of course even in the traditional Abagusii and Agikuyu communities women were beaten. However our concern is that this retrogressive practice of battering has persisted and the argument is that GBV is detrimental to women empowerment and that it perpetuates poverty in these communities. The apparent justifications for women or husband battering notwithstanding, it is now punishable by law in Kenya especially with the new constitution that talks extensively against human rights abuse.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy refers to a social system based on male privilege and power in which women are regarded as secondary, created for the service of men. In Patriarchal social setting the means of household –based production is owned by a group of patriarchs socially recognized as the heads of households or extended family units. The wives, unmarried daughters, sons and junior siblings (including males) of the patriarchal class are dependants and are denied free access to the means of production on the basis of ideological and political criteria.

The means of access to resources for women and young unmarried males is set by the patriarchal class. This is achieved though marriage. Therefore patriarchy is one of the causes of feminization of

poverty in Kenya because women are controlled by men for the benefit of men. They cannot for instance take a bank loan without being guaranteed by the husband or a grown up son. Patriarchy related stress like being the breadwinner leads to much mental disorder among men, and sometimes death leading to many widows. This fuels poverty among women because of loss of breadwinner.

Limited Education Opportunities

In the past, most of Kenyan ethnic communities did not give the girl-child education opportunities. This practice has not been wholly eliminated, although the girl child has more access to education among the Abagusii and the Agikuyu than before.

The idea was that there was no need of educating a girl who would have to be married off. It was thought that an educated girl would not assist the family/community but would only be beneficial to her future husband. Therefore a family or a community's resources were pulled to educate the boy-child. This perpetuated feminization of poverty because girls had limited employment opportunities because of lack of educational skills.

The campaigns for women empowerment among the Agikuyu have been carried extensively to a point that there is now the danger of neglect of the boy child. The slogan that 'you educate a boy child you educate one individual and you educate a girl you educate the whole community' has been adopted by the Agikuyu people. This poses a danger because the next gender campaigns might require seeking for empowerment of the boy child. Among the Abagusii a lot of gains have been made in increasing literacy levels of women. However more still need to be done. Overall in the whole country there are more illiterate women in Kenya compared to men. Thus, there is no doubt that illiteracy among women is a contributing factor to poverty among women. However it is important to point out that some gains have been made and education has to an extent empowered the woman than any other time before both among the Abagusii and the Agikuyu people. With improved access to education anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a decline in the number of housewives as women have increasingly joined the labour force.

The growth of female-headed households

The growth of female headed households due to incidences of having single mothers as a result of death or divorce increases poverty in women. The woman is left to fend for the children on her own. There are also cases of single mothers arising from men refusing to marry or provide for the girls or women they impregnate indiscriminately. HIV/AIDS has also contributed to having many widows (or even orphans) whose husbands have died of the epidemic. This has contributed to massive poverty among the widows. The high life expectancy for women compared to men also leads to incidences of increasing number of widows compared to widowers. This has also contributed to poverty among women because the breadwinner is no longer available.

Alcoholism and drug abuse

Alcoholism and drug abuse is more common among men in Kenya than among women. Drinking of lethal illicit brews known by various names such as *Kumi Kumi* and changaa is quite common particularly in the villages. This has become a major problem to an extent that it is being blamed for the low rate of population growth in central province in the last ten years. These brews make men to become zombie or irresponsible. Such men may be physically present but they do not contribute to household income. In fact they are a liability to the family because they might sell family property to fund alcohol and drug abuse. This immensely leads to feminization of poverty in Kenya.

Persistent discrimination of women

In most Kenyan communities, women are persistently discriminated in property ownership and also in employment opportunities. The new constitution of Kenya requires that women occupy at least 30 percent of employment opportunities in the public service. Recently there were media reports that this could not be implemented in police recruitment because the police force work under very difficult conditions which women cannot cope with. This shows that even with the new constitution, women discrimination still continues unabated. Mayra Buvinic, argues that worldwide, women on average earn just over 50 per cent of what men are earn. Often, women obtain low wages for work done because of persistent sexual discrimination in terms of employment and wages.

In terms of property ownership, some gains have been made. In the past among the Abagusii for instance men owned cows while women and children owned chicken. Today some women are empowered to an extent that women own cows while men have no chicken.

Politics and religion

Politics has undermined women development. For example, it is only from 1979 in Kenya that women were issued with National Identity Cards (IDs). Without the IDs, the women could not enter into contracts like taking a loan, buying land or buying a vehicle without involving the men. Some time it is argued that Women are their own worst enemies when it comes to elective politics. Statistics show that they form the biggest block of voters and yet they cannot elect their own. They therefore end up lacking adequate representation in parliament or local authorities in Kenya. Thus their issues are not adequately tackled because of the men's numerical advantage of elected representatives.

There is also some notion that most of successful women in the public arena are divorcees or single, and they do not care for the family. They give examples of Wangari Maathai, Njoki Ndung'u, Martha Karua and Charity Ngilu among others. They say that successful men maintain their wives while successful women in politics do not respect their husbands leading to divorce. This has a domino effect where a woman may face challenges and discouragements when aspiring for high office. The women aspirant may face election-related violence which is unleashed by men. She therefore opts out and this vicious cycle leads to women issues being at the periphery of Kenya's political agenda, leading to further marginalization of women in Kenya. This further leads to more and more poverty for the Kenyan woman. Among the Agikuyu there is fear that voting for a woman leader is equivalent to putting the community under the leadership of *Wangu wa Makeri* who Agikuyu legends says she was a very powerful chief who used to sit on men instead of sitting on a chair.

The political marginalisation is extended to religious leadership. Some religions dictate that women have no say in life. There are more male religious leaders in Kenya than female religious leaders. In fact the mainstream churches are headed by men, from Catholic, Methodists, SDA, Anglican, and African Inland Church. This means that women's issues are not adequately addressed even at the spiritual level. This perpetuates marginalisation and feminization of poverty as women are reduced to church goers and contributors of the tithe and offerings which goes to the pockets of men.

The Kenyan media

Media refers to any instrument (medium) for mass communication. The Kenyan media involves TV, radio, newspapers, posters, pamphlets, among others. In Kenya, women receive about 10% of media representation despite their high population of 52%. Male sourced stories are more than

women's. Thus there is a media bias where women issues are at the periphery and not adequately addressed. There is more and more politics and less of gender or women affairs. For example if the news ever address the women issues, it is negative news like '*woman dumps infant in pit latrine after father runs away*'. There is little analysis of social structures as why this happened. The story will go on about how the police have arrested the woman involved while the father is scot-free. Therefore, the media perpetuates marginalization of women issues are not brought adequately brought to the public attention. Even with the increase of vernacular FM radio stations women issues have not been given more coverage.

Environmental Factors and Natural Calamities

Environmental factors like prolonged droughts, famines and flooding have led to food insecurity. More and more people are driven to poverty by such occurrences. The citizens are reduced to relief seekers. Three quarters of Kenya's population is dependent on the agriculture. With the erratic weather patterns and vast regions of arid lands agriculture is not economically lucrative. Thus agriculture is a very unstable sector. Periods of drought can be crippling, not only in terms of food supply but in jobs creation as well. Tropical diseases like malaria cause death of breadwinners. Diseases like yellow fever lead to death of livestock leading to perpetuation of poverty. Soil erosion leads to decreased yields. Children drop out of school due to lack of fees or having to trek long distances to help the family get domestic water. The deterioration of environmental conditions and low agricultural production affects women than men leading to poverty among women. Women have to struggle to feed families and to get basic necessities such as water and firewood.

Cash cropping

The Kenyan economy is production-based with little manufacturing or value addition for the produce. The exports are usually comprised of raw materials which fetch fewer returns compared to manufactured goods. This means therefore that family income is less. Even when crops have been sufficient, poor government policies and international trade terms have hampered agricultural growth, leading to further declines in the industry through years. Starting in 1991, further serious problems in the country's GDP became evident due to freezing of donor aid, leading to extended government internal borrowing, retrenchment of civil servants and freeze of employment which has not proven to be successful at stemming the tide of poverty in Kenya.

This extended poverty affects the households. However, women are more affected by men because of child bearing and child rearing demands. Cash crop production perpetuates poverty among women because these crops are largely owned by men while women are the till the land and look after the crops.

Weak overall infrastructure

Weak overall infrastructure for the country means that nearly all the rural population are forced to rely on their own subsistence farming for their own food as well as monetary income. Jobs are scarce in Kenya, leaving people with little opportunity for employment. Citizens are employed as casuals to do menial work in quarries, construction sites, gardeners, herders and watchmen, among others.

However, it is worth noting that most of the casual jobs available are for men. Women are disadvantaged in getting the casual income. Women have been forced to do jobs that were in the past regarded as menial. Men who are in charge of those jobs solicit for sexual favours from women seeking the casual jobs. This discourages women, while those who dare accept may get Sexually

Transmitted Diseases (STDs) or unwanted pregnancy hence perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty among women. Women also find it difficult to venture into business because they require husbands' approval and in addition they lack collateral.

The poor situation of women is not helped by corruption in the government. The core of the government system remains corrupt. The top cream in government is men. This means that they benefit from official corruption more than women. More so, the women who are either low cadre officers or even jobless citizens are more likely to experience the negative effects of this corruption. The cycle of poverty among women goes on from generation to generation, while men may escape poverty if they get to a position of influence where they might get kick backs. More so, women are not involved informed or involved of the corruption network due to cultural perception that they cannot keep a secret.

Way forward

The main question that should be in the mind of the reader at the end of this paper is the question of what can be done to reduce feminization of poverty in Kenya. It is worth noting that various conferences, workshops, seminars, and even symposia have been held to try and answer this question. For example, there was The Beijing Platform for Action, China in 1995 that was negotiated and adopted by over 180 countries that attended the conference. The Beijing Platform for Action blueprint highlighted several critical areas of concern, one of which was '*women and poverty*'. It urged the international community, governments and civil society to act in a number of ways.

1. Review, adopt and maintain macroeconomic policies and development strategies that address the needs and effort of women in poverty.
2. Develop gender-based methodologies and conduct research to address the feminization of poverty and social change in rural Kenya.
3. Revise laws and administrative practices to ensure women's equal rights and access to economic resources.
4. Provide women with access to savings and credit mechanisms and institutions.
5. Setting up a Ministry that deals with gender (women) affairs.

The Beijing Platform for Action reported that the number of women living in poverty had increased disproportionately to the number of men, particularly in developing countries. In addition to economic factors, the rigidity of socially ascribed gender roles and women's limited access to power, education, training and productive resources were also responsible.

What does the future hold for the woman with the new constitution?

The Kenyan government now recognises that there is a gender dimension to poverty, with policies specifically addressing the needs of women. It has therefore put up some notable efforts to address feminization of poverty in Kenya. These are:

1. There is the Women Enterprise Fund that gives loans to women to start business ventures. It also gives financial guidance on investment options available to women.
2. Affirmative Action in admission to public universities where girls are admitted with one point less compared to boys.
3. The constitution has provisions for certain positions to be reserved for women to enhance women representation.
4. There has been an increased enrolment of girls in Primary and Secondary education level.

5. There have been an increased number of women in the public arena who can be an inspiration to the poor Kenyan woman.
6. Restructuring women based organization like the Kenya Women finance Trust (KWFT) to take up deposits so that it builds its capital base to benefit women.
7. Introduction of special bank accounts for women like the Diba Account of the Standard Chartered bank.
8. Improvement of infrastructure like availability of water to avoid long time wasted looking for the commodity.
9. There has also been the Rural Electrification programme and efforts to tarmac rural roads access network to ensure produce gets to the market.
10. Sustained civic education to ensure the girl-child and the women has a place in the male dominated society. This ensures participatory development for all in the Society.

Conclusions

Poverty reduction programs need to focus on understanding the underlying causes of poverty among women in Kenya. Then programmes can be initiated to address the reasons / factors behind the feminization of poverty in Kenya. Fortunately there is a growing consciousness in the Kenyan Society on the need to tackle Feminization of Poverty in Kenya. This is because empowering women is a critical factor in stopping the cycle of poverty.

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