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### Feminist Perspective of Community Development Practices in Nepal

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#### Abstract

Feminist perspective of community development encompasses the gender sensitive development practices to ensure the equitable share of benefits and progress to all community members regardless of gender disparity. This research paper aims to examine the current status of gender inequality and the application of feminist principles into community development initiatives in Nepal as a pathway for achieving gender equality. This paper has prepared in a descriptive research design which is based on the secondary information collected from different scholarly published sources such as journal article, edited books, publication of government and other organization along with online database through official websites of respective organizations, Google scholar, NepJOL and so on. The findings reveal that incorporating feminist principles in community development practices can result in positive outcomes such as increased participation of women and leadership in decision-making processes and improved access to resources and services. It concludes that incorporating feminist principles into community development initiatives can play pivotal role in achieving gender equality, reduced gender based violence and promoting inclusive and sustainable development in Nepal. Therefore, the study suggests that it is essential to implement targeted capacity-building programs to empower women with essential skills and knowledge, ensuring their active participation

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and leadership in community development initiatives to promote gender equality and inclusive progress in Nepal.

**Keywords:** Community development, gender sensitive, inclusive, feminist perspective

### **Introduction**

Community development is a beautiful journey that unfolds when individuals come together, supported by various agencies, to recognize and address matters close to their hearts. It is a collaborative process that empowers community members, making a sense of unity and building stronger, more interconnected neighbourhoods. Socio-demographic theory of community development is dedicated to the equal moral worth of each citizen which socially provides the cultural and economic necessities such as food, clothing, housing, security, quality in education, healthcare, childcare and minimum amenities for the development of human individuality (Schwartz and Schulman, 2012). Feminist community development practice is a holistic approach that combines feminist principles with community development strategies to address gender inequalities, promote women's empowerment, and achieve social justice. In the 1970s, the activism of working-class women at the local level, especially within the Community Development Projects (CDPs), began to merge with the rising feminism among female practitioners (Dominelli, 2006). While women workers in the CDPs often shared a Marxist perspective with their male colleagues, they experienced marginalization as women. This led to discussions about gender and power in the field of community work (Hanmer and Rose, 1980). Whilst the subsequent dynamic of female activism was creative and productive, it also contained its own tensions related to differences and inequalities, particularly of class, race and sexuality between women (Bryan et al. 2018).

An early declaration of community activism by the Combahee River Collective (1977) was inspired by Angela Davis's insight that Black women in the United States have always been key to anti-oppressive movements due to their unique personal, social, and economic situations (Davis, 1981). The analyses conducted by Black women significantly influenced community development strategies that embraced a feminist perspective. This marked a pivotal moment when issues of identity and the realities of differences and inequalities among women began to shape the collective practices of feminism. Community engagement was integral to the understanding of Black feminist activists and academics such as bell hooks (2003) and this in turn informed the understanding of community development practitioners and theorists in the United Kingdom (Ledwith and Springett, 2010).

Community development initiatives have been a vital tool for creating change and promoting equality in Nepal. However, despite significant progress in recent years, gender inequality continues to be a significant issue in the country. Women continue

to face discrimination and exclusion from decision-making processes, limiting their access to opportunities and resources. Feminist principles offer a potential pathway for addressing these issues and promoting gender equality within community development initiatives. Feminist principles encompass not only gender-related issues but also involve recognizing power dynamics, promoting representation, embracing diversity, and ensuring inclusion from an intersectional standpoint (DIHLC, 2020).

In recent years, Nepal has recognized the significance of integrating feminist principles into community development, challenging traditional power structures and striving for gender equality. This trend aligns with the global recognition of the importance of incorporating feminist principles into community development initiatives. Women have low self-esteem and are not proactive in taking any actions that bring changes to themselves, family and community. Therefore, the Community Based Organisation (CBO) is founded as the grassroots medium that can benefit women to improve the standard of living of local community (Acharya, et al., 2005)

Despite Nepal's constitutional commitment to gender equality and significant progress made, women still face discrimination, limited political representation, and restricted access to education, healthcare, and employment. While community development initiatives address some aspects, they often neglect the root causes of gender inequality, such as patriarchal norms and power imbalances. Nepal ranks 106th out of 162 countries in terms of gender equality, with women facing barriers in education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (NPC, 2020). Feminist approach in community development initiatives is a growing movement aimed at challenging power structures, promoting gender equality, empowering marginalized groups, prioritizing marginalized communities, fostering women's leadership, and addressing the underlying causes of gender-based discrimination and violence. The community forestry program would be the good example of successful community development program to empower women.

Nepal implements feminist principles in development initiatives through organizations like the Women's Foundation Nepal, Saathi, and WOREC Nepal. These organizations focus on women's empowerment, ending violence against women, and promoting human rights. They play a crucial role in Nepal's pursuit of equality and empowerment, fostering inclusive and sustainable development outcomes. The feminist approach in Nepal's community development promotes gender equality, empowerment, and inclusive, sustainable outcomes. In this regard, this paper aims to examine the current status of gender inequality and tries to explore the application of feminist principles into community development initiatives in Nepal.

### **Research Methodology**

This research paper follows descriptive research design to get a better

understanding of gender equality in community development practices in Nepal. The collected data for this paper are both quantitative as well as qualitative in nature, providing insightful and in-depth perspectives on gender equality. Since, this paper is based on the secondary information, the data obtained from online database such as Research Gate, Google scholar, JSTOR, TUCL, and other official records of national and international organizations such as different official online sources government of Nepal, United Nations, UNESCO and so on along with different published scholarly and institutional sources. Quantitative data are analysed applying simple descriptive statistical technique whereas thematic analysis are applied to qualitative data by selecting key themes. Online as well governmental database are triangulated to the other published data available in different scholarly publication so that the result is supposed to be valid and reliable. Furthermore, some empirical data and case study along with theoretical perspectives are added to validate the findings.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Results**

Feminism is characterized by specific unique traits and its influence is noticeable in various facets of society. Payne (2005) identified five types of feminism: “liberal, radical, socialist, black, and postmodern.” In today’s male-dominated society, feminism champions women in vulnerable positions within families or communities, advocating for social justice and equal rights beyond traditional norms. Specifically, feminists work to combat gender inequality in education, employment, and health care are crucial (Butler-Mokoro & Grant, 2017).

Despite increasing awareness in modern society, gender discrimination remains widespread in workplaces. Feminists argue that this patriarchal social structure exists because male dominate various sectors, including politics, economics, and education (Popple, 2015). Feminism has empowered marginalized groups to create communities influenced by the women’s movement, advocating for “equality, social justice, and autonomy” (Briskman et al., 2003). This theory empowers communities, enabling them to combat inequality not just in terms of gender but also encompassing race and sexual orientation, thereby granting marginalized groups the opportunity to enhance their quality of life and foster a stronger sense of community well-being.

Feminist theories are presented as a threat to the dominant social order (Saulnier, 1996). Feminist social work practitioners rely on the theory that challenges pathologizing discourses about women that lead to inequality and oppression. Practitioners are encouraged to critically analyze feminist theory to effectively address the diverse issues faced by women (Saulnier, 1996). Van Den Bergh (1995) asserts the importance of socially constructed knowledge. She points at the feminists’ concern with consciousness-

raising as a form of knowledge production, which includes the life experiences of women. Naming reality empowers marginalized voices, emphasizing the link between knowledge and power. Social workers must create space for these voices, often silenced by societal hierarchies, to ensure they are heard and influential. The claim of the third-wave feminism is to go beyond rights and equity, although these are notable challenges in a global world.

The post-structuralist agenda, established decades ago, emphasizes the importance of understanding the intricate dynamics of power, oppression, and resistance in a media-driven global economy. It suggests that apparent progress might not be the change we truly need, and what seems like regression could actually be progressive (Heywood & Drake, 1997). Constitution of Nepal 2072 ensures that all citizens are granted fundamental rights, irrespective of their ethnicity, caste, religion, or gender. These rights encompass property inheritance and are governed by family laws, which oversee matters such as marriage, divorce, and property rights. However, certain provisions within these laws have significantly limit economic opportunities and rights for women. In response, feminist principles have emerged as a means to challenge discriminatory provisions and existence of privilege. Feminists often view privileged groups as obstacles to achieving equal rights for all women, transcending the divisions between privileged and underprivileged segments of society.

### **Feminist Principles**

**Feminist Theory:** Feminist theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding gender inequality and oppression. It examines the social, political, and economic factors that contribute to gender disparities and advocates for the empowerment of women. Feminist theory emphasizes the need to challenge patriarchal norms and structures in community development initiatives.

**Gender equality:** Gender equality is a core principle in feminist theory and activism, advocating for the equal rights, opportunities, and treatment of people of all genders. It challenges the prevailing social, economic, and political structures that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and inequality. Economically, feminism addresses the gender wage gap, occupational segregation, and unequal opportunities for career advancement. It aims to challenge and change the systemic barriers that limit women's access to equal, opportunities, and leadership positions (UN, 2020).

**Empowerment and Solidarity:** Feminism promotes the empowerment of women and marginalized individuals, encouraging them to develop self-confidence, assertiveness, and leadership skills. It also emphasizes the importance of building networks of support and solidarity among feminists to effect meaningful social change (Mohanty, 1988).

**Patriarchy Critique:** The principle of Patriarchy Critique is central to feminism, which analyses and challenges patriarchal systems perpetuating male dominance and

privilege. These systems shape social, political, and economic structures, resulting in unequal power dynamics and limited opportunities for women and marginalized genders. Feminism aims to dismantle these systems to create a more equitable society by questioning and transforming existing power structures, promoting gender equality (Hooks, 2000).

**Intersectionality:** Intersectionality theory recognizes that individuals experience multiple intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination based on factors such as gender, race, class, and more. Applying an intersectional lens in community development initiatives can help identify and address the unique challenges faced by different groups of women in Nepal. This theory emphasizes the need to adopt an inclusive and holistic approach that takes into account the various dimensions of identity (Van Den Bergh, 1995). Feminist social workers challenge the dominant social order by questioning who gains from privileges that hinder the quality of life for certain groups who bear social costs. They present feminist theories as a challenge to this prevailing system.

### **Community Initiatives for Gender Equality**

Today, feminist movements all over the world are questioning the way things are and asking for fairness between genders. Gender equality means everyone should have the same opportunities, rights, and ability to participate and make decisions, regardless of their identity. Western societies have seen significant improvements in women's status, especially after World War II, recognizing their crucial role in development. Governments have enacted policies to protect human rights, tackle issues like human trafficking, and promote gender equality. Technology has further enabled women to contribute significantly. Achieving gender equality is essential for progress globally. A 2015 survey in 38 countries found that 65% of people support equal rights, with educated women showing the strongest support (Acharya, 2020).

The vision of 15<sup>th</sup> plan on gender development and women empowerment is to transform Nepal into a gender-equal nation, where men and women have equal rights and opportunities. The goal is to achieve substantial gender equality by ensuring women's equal and meaningful participation in all spheres of life. To realize this vision, the objectives are to establish a gender-responsive governance regime that fosters an environment for women to lead respectable lives, eliminate all forms of discrimination, violence, and exploitation against women, and ensure women's equal access to resources, opportunities, and benefits. Additionally, promoting women's initiative and leadership roles is crucial for the economic prosperity and sustainable development of the nation (NPC, 2020).

There will be an increase in the Gender Development Index, rising from 0.897 to 0.963. The percentage of women who have experienced physical, psychological, and

sexual violence in their lifetime will witness a decrease from 24.4 to 13 percentages. Gender-friendly policies and acts will have been formulated and implemented at the federal, provincial, and local levels. There will be a significant reduction in all forms of discrimination and exploitation, accompanied by a comprehensive assessment of women's contribution to the national income. The adoption of a gender-responsive budget will be established across all levels, and a data system will be developed to effectively measure gender equality and empowerment (NPC, 2020).

Women in Nepal have historically faced poverty, social marginalization, and exclusion due to their gender, particularly among ethnic minorities and lower-caste communities. From 2002 to 2013, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Government of Nepal collaborated on the Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women Project. This initiative aimed to alleviate poverty by empowering rural women and other marginalized groups through a comprehensive approach encompassing economic, social, legal, and political empowerment. The project played a significant role in Nepal's efforts to combat gender-based inequality (ADB, 2016).

Globally, progress has been made on women's rights, and Nepal has made significant strides in promoting gender equality. Legal frameworks that promote gender equality and address violence against women are largely in place. Women hold 32.7 percent of seats in parliament, showing improved representation. The satisfaction of women's family planning needs has increased to 61.9 percent using modern methods. However, challenges persist in Nepal. A significant number of women marry or enter unions before the age of 18, and the adolescent birth rate remains a concern, although it has decreased. Instances of physical and/or sexual violence by intimate partners are reported by 11.4 percent of women aged 15-49. Gender data gaps persist, particularly in areas such as unpaid care, domestic work, ICT skills, gender and poverty, harassment, women's access to assets, and the environment. Addressing these gaps is crucial to fulfil gender-related SDG commitments in Nepal (UN, 2020).

The example of Dhanamaya BK and other women actively involved in community development initiatives reaffirms the significance of empowering women and recognizing their vital role in building sustainable and resilient communities. Their dedication and achievements further emphasize the transformative potential of community-driven approaches in creating positive social change and fostering a more gender-equal society in Nepal. Female Community Health Volunteers in Community-Based Health Programs of Nepal: Future Perspective article provides an example of a community-based initiative that has promoted women's empowerment in Nepal. The study highlights the role of female community health volunteers in improving maternal and child health outcomes and promoting women's participation in decision-making (Khatri, et al. 2017).

**Success story**

Dhanamaya BK, a resident of Harion Municipality in Sarlahi district, Nepal, has transformed from a marginalized Dalit woman facing severe discrimination to a prominent leader through her commitment to forest conservation and community empowerment. Despite initial resistance from her community, Dhanamaya's efforts in forest management led to her election as the first president of the women-led Pragatishil Community Forest User Group. Her leadership significantly contributed to restoring degraded lands and building climate resilience. Her journey continued with her election as a ward member in 2015 and re-election in 2022, demonstrating her enduring impact and inspiring other women in her community to pursue leadership roles. Dhanamaya's story highlights the role of community forestry in supporting grassroots women for women empowerment (Annapurna Express, 2022).

Gender responsive budgeting is being increasingly implemented in a number of nations in the Asia-Pacific region. In South Asia, Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) has gained recognition at the highest levels of government as a means to integrate gender considerations into planning and budgeting processes. In Bangladesh, there is a strong emphasis on using GRB to incorporate gender perspectives into the budget call circular. According to a few researches, one of the major obstacles South Asian nations such as Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal confront is the lack of evidence of poverty and the level of life of the poor, environmental conditions, and even the availability of services (Bhul, 2022).

**Table 1**

*The global gender gap index rankings of Nepal, 2022*

Country	Regional rank	Global rank	Gender gap (%)
Bangladesh	1	71	71.4
Nepal	2	96	69.2
Sri Lanka	3	110	67
Maldives	4	117	64.8
Bhutan	5	126	63.7
India	6	135	62.9
Pakistan	7	146	56.4
Afghanistan	8	146	43.5

*Source: World Economic Forum, 2022.*

Since 2006, the Global Gender Gap Index has used health, education, economic, and political indicators to assess the extent of gender-based disparities in various nations. As a result, countries where the GRB process results in budget allocations should fare



better in gender equality reports and indices than countries where the GRB process simply calculates how much of the budget helps women. The 2022 Global Gender Gap Index report provides country rankings for effective comparisons both between and within regions, and it presents progress reports for 153 countries.

The higher the percentage of the gender gap that has been narrowed, the more successful the country appears to be. Bangladesh emerged as the top-performing country, reducing the gender gap by 71.4 percent by 2022. Nepal and Sri Lanka closely follow Bangladesh, having narrowed the gap by 69.2 and 67.0 percent, respectively; among South Asian nations (refer to Table 1). India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan ranked the lowest in the region, having closed the gender gap by 66.8 percent.

### **Political Representation and Participation of Women**

Political representation across South Asia remains bleak, with only 19% of parliamentary seats held by women. Maldives ranks notably higher among the top fifty countries, with significant female cabinet representation at 33.3%, followed by Nepal at 15.8%, Bhutan at 10%, Bangladesh at 10%, Pakistan at 9.4%, India at 6.7%, and Sri Lanka at 0% female cabinet representation, placing them at lower ranks. This concerning pattern of low representation in politics across these nations is a matter of global concern and stems from gender disparities, resulting in substantial challenges and reduced levels of female political participation. Only India and Nepal have women serving as heads of state as female Speaker in Parliament (IPU and UN Women, 2023).

Manandhar (2021) discuss the low levels of women's representation in decision-making and leadership positions in Nepal, with women making up only 33.2 percent of elected representatives at the local level as of 2017. She also noted the persistence of gender-based violence and discrimination in Nepal, with a high prevalence of domestic violence and rape. Even with the provision of 33 per cent participation of women in the CA, in some cases, the influence of women in the decision-making and constitution-building has been found to be limited. Men often fail to recognize women's involvement in debates and discussions on various topics of general interest.

As per the Article 84(8) of the Constitution of Nepal 2072, at least one third of the total members elected from each political party represented in the federal parliament shall be women. Although the constitution has ensured proportional and inclusive participation of women, achieving this goal remains elusive. Disparities also persist in societal perceptions of leadership. Despite the presence of highly capable women leaders, our society still tends to view men as more suitable for leadership roles. Attitude of the society towards women leaders have not progressed.

**Table 2***Women elected in different levels and bodies in 2017 & 2022 in Nepal*

SN	Level of the state body	Total	2017		2022	
			Women	Men	Women	Men
1	Member of the HoR*	275	91	184	91	184
2	Member of National Assembly	59	22	37	22	37
3	Member of Provinces	550	189	361	200	350
4	Mayor and Chair at the Local level	753	18	735	25	728
5	Deputy Mayor and Vice chair ,,	753	714	39	569	184
6	Elected ward chair	6743	62	6681	69	6674

*Source: Election Commission of Nepal, 2017/2022*

\* HoR= House of Representative

Table 2 shows that in 2017 and 2022 elections for local, provincial, and federal parliament, the gender representation results have actually gotten worse in the second election. None of the political parties have honoured the constitutional requirement for proportionate representation, and they have only met the minimum legal quotas.

Even the female representation is not significantly improving in decision making level from ward chair to municipal chair, the budget allocation of government of Nepal seems to be gender responsive during the last one and half decade. The status of gender responsive budgeting of Nepal shown in the table below:

**Table 3***Gender Responsive Budgeting System in Nepal*

Fiscal Year	Percentage of Budget
2007/08	11.30
2016/17	23.10
2017/18	37.40
2018/19	38.65
2019/20	38.17
2020/21	38.16
2021/22	39.49
2022/23	40.25
2023/24	42.26

*Source: MoF, 2023; Artha Mantralaye, 2081BS*

Table 3 demonstrate that there is significant change of budgeting system in terms of gender responsiveness. During the period of ten years from fiscal year 2007/08 to 2016/17, the proportion of gender responsive budgeting almost doubled and which

also increased by nearly 83 percent from 2016/17 to 2023/24. This figure depicts the significant change in Nepalese budgetary system and becoming gender friendly even if it does not seem sufficient to ensure gender equality in Nepal.

## **Discussion**

Feminism, characterized by diverse traits, has significantly influenced various facets of society, advocating for women's rights and challenging patriarchal norms. Payne (2005) identified five types of feminism: liberal, radical, socialist, black, and postmodern, each with unique approaches to addressing gender inequality. In male-dominated societies, feminism champions the rights of women in vulnerable positions within families and communities, advocating for social justice and equal rights beyond traditional norms. Butler-Mokoro and Grant (2017) emphasize the importance of combating gender inequality in education, employment, and healthcare.

Despite increasing awareness, gender discrimination remains pervasive in workplaces, perpetuated by patriarchal structures dominated by men in politics, economics, and education (Popple, 2015). Feminist movements have empowered marginalized groups, creating communities that advocate for equality, social justice, and autonomy (Briskman et al., 2003). Feminist theories challenge the dominant social order by addressing issues of inequality and oppression, encouraging social workers to critically analyze these theories to effectively address the diverse issues faced by women (Saulnier, 1996).

Van Den Bergh (1995) highlights the importance of socially constructed knowledge and consciousness-raising as a form of knowledge production, emphasizing the link between knowledge and power. Feminist social workers aim to create spaces for marginalized voices, challenging societal hierarchies and ensuring these voices are heard and influential. The post-structuralist agenda, established decades ago, emphasizes understanding power dynamics, oppression, and resistance in a global economy (Heywood & Drake, 1997).

In Nepal, the Constitution of 2072 ensures fundamental rights for all citizens, irrespective of ethnicity, caste, religion, or gender. However, certain provisions within family laws have limited economic opportunities and rights for women. Feminist principles have emerged to challenge these discriminatory provisions and advocate for equal rights, transcending divisions between privileged and underprivileged groups. Feminist theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding gender inequality, emphasizing the need to challenge patriarchal norms in community development initiatives. Gender equality is a core principle of feminist theory, advocating for equal rights, opportunities, and treatment for all genders. Feminism addresses the gender wage gap, occupational segregation, and unequal opportunities for career

advancement, aiming to challenge systemic barriers that limit women's access to equal pay and leadership positions (UN, 2020).

The principle of Patriarchy Critique is central to feminism, analyzing and challenging patriarchal systems that perpetuate male dominance and privilege. Intersectionality theory recognizes multiple forms of oppression and discrimination based on factors such as gender, race, and class. Applying an intersectional lens in community development initiatives helps identify and address the unique challenges faced by different groups of women in Nepal (Van Den Bergh, 1995).

Historical examples, such as the Greenham Common Women's Peace Movement, highlight the power of grassroots activism and collective action for social and political change (Dominelli, 1995). Community initiatives for gender equality emphasize the need for fairness and equal opportunities for all, recognizing the crucial role of women in development and promoting gender equality through policies and technology (Acharya, 2020).

The vision of Nepal's 15th plan (2019/2020-2023/2024) aims to transform Nepal into a gender-equal nation with equal rights and opportunities for men and women. The objectives include establishing a gender-responsive governance regime, eliminating discrimination and violence against women, and ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities (NPC, 2020). Despite progress, challenges persist, such as early marriages, adolescent birth rates, and gender data gaps (UN, 2020).

In South Asia, Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) integrates gender considerations into planning and budgeting processes. Nepal has made significant strides in GRB, with a notable increase in gender-responsive budgeting over the past decade (MoF, 2023). However, patriarchal culture and discriminatory laws continue to hinder gender equality in Nepal. Feminism emphasizes intersectionality and the empowerment of women to challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender equality through collective action and community mobilization.

The documents clearly emphasize the different perspectives of feminism, such as; liberal, radical, socialist, and postmodern, has profoundly influenced societal structures by advocating for women's rights and challenging rooted patriarchal norms. Despite significant progress, gender discrimination remains pervasive, particularly in male-dominated workplaces and institutions. Feminist principles have been instrumental in empowering marginalized groups, fostering communities that advocate for social justice, equality, and autonomy. Success stories from Nepal, like that of Dhanamaya BK, highlight the impact of empowering women and their active participation in community development, demonstrating the potential for community-driven approaches to create meaningful social change. The vision of Nepal's 15th plan, which aims to establish a gender-equal nation with equal rights and opportunities, reflects a commitment to

overcoming these challenges and promoting gender equality through targeted policies and community mobilization.

### **Conclusion**

Feminist principles and theories provide a robust framework for understanding and addressing gender inequality and oppression in community development. In Nepal, despite constitutional guarantees and significant progress in gender-responsive budgeting, patriarchal norms and discriminatory laws continue to pose challenges. Empowering women and recognizing their vital role in community development is essential for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. Success stories of women leaders revealed that transformative potential of community-driven approaches, inspiring further efforts to achieve gender equality and social justice. Feminism's emphasis on intersectionality, empowerment, and collective action offers valuable insights and strategies for promoting gender equality and improving the quality of life for marginalized groups in Nepal. Ongoing efforts and a holistic approach that encompasses policy reforms, social change, and community mobilization are vital in realizing the vision of a society where both men and women enjoy equal rights and opportunities.

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