

# WOMEN ON THE MOVE



## Battered Wife – You can Beat it

by Rehana Amin Murshed

THE pun in the title may seem funny but the stories behind it are not. If you open any daily newspaper you will invariably be confronted with news like 'Women hacked to death', 'A young bride takes her life', 'A female body found in a nearby pond', 'Wife doused in petrol and set in flames', and many more. If you care to read further than the headlines, you will be amazed and shocked to learn that each of these women ended up being dead because of domestic quarrels and the husband is almost always the perpetrator of such a crime. And her fault? Perhaps a slight lack of deference shown to her husband, or she had an altercation with the uncompromising mother-in-law, or she was seen talking to another male, or she couldn't fulfill the dowry demand, or even as trivial as being late in serving food to her husband. Are any of these justifiable causes to subject a woman with such heinous treatment? Obviously the answer is not simple nor can it lie in a certain behaviour pattern of a particular person nor in a situation but perhaps in the society we live in.

Bangladeshi society or even society in the Indian subcontinent because of its socio-cultural and religious background facilitates the perception of a woman as submissive, dependent and all accommodating in relation to man. Her role as a wife and a mother must remain the only goal in her life. In other words she is there to

fuse to agree to his marriage with a poor girl, and tried to get the foetus aborted. When this failed, they used other pressures upon the father.

Shima Rani tried to negotiate with the family, but when they started threatening her, she was left with no option except to file a case against Bimal Chandra under GR No 54/90, Sunamganj Thana, ST No 7/91.

The case dragged on for several years. In the meantime,

### How long can a Woman Wait in Jail for a Trial?

Bimal petitioned for the transfer of the case to the juvenile court on the plea that he was a minor. The judge did not agree and Bimal then tried to move the High Court in 1991. On 13 June 1994 the High Court Division of the Supreme Court rejected Bimal's petition, and the case is under trial.

Ain O Salish Kendra has been able to obtain court permission to place her in a shelter. In these efforts the local administration in

Sunamganj was extremely concerned and supportive.

Nevertheless Shima Rani's condition demands an answer:

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Will justice take account of her sufferings?

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nothing about it. Tendency to sweep it all under the carpet and deny the existence of such problems seems to be the general attitude.

It is relevant to mention that right after the liberation war some women's groups have created hue and cry and tried to highlight the problems of violence towards women but they have not come up with any solution besides exposing the problems. Ms Shamima Islam president of 'Centre for Women And Development' conducted a survey covering violence of all sorts perpetrated on women but as the data was collected from a secondary source viz a daily Bangla newspaper it had its limitations. Ubina another feminist group, confirmed then study to rape cases only. A recent study was conducted by a researcher in BRAC with an objective specifically to investigate the violence experienced by women from their husbands. Rita Das Sen (Researcher) based her study on fifty women selected from a village in Jamalpur. Her findings revealed that domestic violence is more prevalent among the poor and illiterate. From her report it is evident that there is a correlation between illiteracy and violence, poverty and violence and also under age marriage and violence.

Education rather lack of it seems to be a major cause for domestic violence. A woman having very little or no education is more likely to be a victim of violence than a literate one. Her lack of education is responsible for being ignorant about her rights and the legal system. She is unaware that under the law a husband cannot marry the second time without the consent of his first wife, nor can he demand dowry from his bride or her family, nor divorce her verbally. For instance Rabeya who was married to Habibur at a very young age was constantly subjected to mental torture because she could not fulfill the dowry commitment. A divorce threat hung over her head causing her immense suffering. If only she was aware of the fact that giving and receiving dowry is illegal and verbal divorce is not binding her plight would have been different. On the other hand Anwara who completed ninth grade and a school teacher has a different story to tell. She takes a major role in family discussions and maintains the family property. Her husband too is a high school graduate. Violence is not the norm in her life.

As for poverty it is apparent from the study that there is an affinity between poverty and violence. A poor rural family who toils from dawn to dusk to meet their daily requirement often engage in violent quarrels at the slightest instigation. Any deviation from the usual domestic equilibrium can lead to ugly consequences. For example, Razzak spends a week's money in one day. He refuses to economise and spends extravagantly on 'good' food like 'big' fish and lots of rice. If Razzak's wife protests she is subjected to merciless beatings. There are many more Razzak's wife who suffer silently because of their husbands irrational behaviours.

A young bride, with little or no knowledge of sex or husband-wife relationship is often brutalised physically and mentally. Listen to the story of Baresa. She was married at the age of thirteen and because of

her inability to satisfy her husband due to her inexperience in sex she was forced to watch her husband having sex with other women. Contrary to Baresa's case a child bride may be subjected to violent and repeated sexual acts causing intense physical and mental agony. Either way they are the victims.

So where do these unfortunate women turn to for justice and refuge? Is there no hope for them? The government has done very little besides ratifying the convention on "Elimination of all forms of discriminations against women". The law enforcing agencies are also reluctant to get involved in domestic violence mainly because it is difficult to identify the primary cause of such a crime. Perhaps the answer lies in women themselves. They must be made to realize that beating is not the norm and they must stand up and protest against this unjustified treatment based on gender inequality.

BRAC through its Paralegal Programme is pointing to an alternative. In 1986 BRAC launched its paralegal programme as a part of rural development. It believes that legal literacy is necessary to promote and protect human rights, and violence in any form is a violation of that right. Discrimination against women will decrease once women are aware of their rights. BRAC initially selected sixty members of their village organizations and trained them in legal awareness. Their job was to disseminate the existing laws of the land to the other village members. Although the programme has been running for the last seven years the impact of it was underrated so far.

A recent survey conducted by a few Bangla-deshi lawyers in July 1993 have given a positive verdict. During their survey they noted that although under age marriage, divorces, 'hila' marriage, polygamy and violence have not dramatically declined but incidents of such cases are coming out in the open and brought to public notice. Registration of marriages have gone up and it is the women who are insisting on it; obviously as a deterrent to divorce. Women are known to voice any injustice as they are aware that there is a background support of the paralegals. A BRAC VO member refused to go through with the 'hila' marriage after she was verbally divorced. Phooljan who attended the paralegal classes was aware that verbal divorce was not valid in the eyes of law. Her husband due to social pressure wanted to give in. The outcome is still pending but the very fact that Phooljan is aware of her rights and demanding to establish that right is a triumph towards women's empowerment. More and more women are attending the local 'shashil' (informal village court) to voice their grievances and forming pressure groups to achieve their rights.

Instances like these are encouraging and give women hope that there is 'light at the end of the tunnel'. Their downtrodden existence can be mitigated or even changed through the process of conscientization of their rights and BRAC's paralegals can act as catalysts in bringing about that change.

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## Gender Awareness in Development

by Sonya M Sultan

IN the 1970's, development planners thought that bringing change among men would automatically benefit women – a sort of 'trickle down effect'. In the 1990's, we know this does not work. So what alternative new strategy can be adopted now?

As identified during a Naripokto Gender Training Workshop in Dhaka a few weeks ago, development projects need to examine two dimensions – women's conditions and their position. There is a need for improvement of women's condition i.e. their health, nutrition, education. In the last two decades, projects having targeted women have mostly addressed these issues. There are now mother and child health clinics or programmes for immunization, family planning, credit, and literacy. These attempts to help women meet their basic needs – by improving their health and ensuring their children are also born healthy; credit programmes provide them with an income which allow them to have three meals a day, better clothes for themselves and their children, etc.

What many of these projects do not change is the women's position in the society in relation to men – with better health and education they are made 'better mothers' and more efficient housewives. However, there is no attempt to bring about a structural change in women's position in society. But why should women only be given the opportunity to become mothers and housewives? What if they want to be farmers, shopkeepers, electricians or government workers? Much of the skill training that has been provided so far has to do with sewing, tailoring, weaving – activities traditionally associated with women, confining them within the household, and reinforcing in their existing social roles. Development planners and workers need to become aware that the process of development should not be limited to simply making women better able to perform their existing roles. It should also attempt to offer new opportunities for women and allow changes in existing gender roles.

Certain organisations have made some headway in this direction. Grameen Bank beneficiaries in north Bangladesh plant their own sugarcane in the fields and being so successful in their commercial enterprise they have been able to build a new house without any financial help from their husbands. Some women Grameen Bank members have even managed to become more economically successful than their husbands who may be unemployed, ill or have no land to cultivate. In such cases, traditional gender roles are reversed – the women becomes

the bread winner while the husband becomes a dependent member of the household.

Unfortunately, such cases are still not common and a large part of the blame lies with government, NGO and International Aid Agency workers and planners. This group still consists mostly of men, who are themselves often gender blind. The scarcity of female staff in these organisations speaks for itself. A lot of the male staff openly admit

children and look after her husband, aid workers see nothing to object to. Male officials expect the same in their own personal lives, so why should they try to impose a different model among the poor?

Gender training tries to make officials and field workers question their own assumptions about the role of women and their position vis a vis men. Once they themselves realise that a woman's life does

them. There has already been some attempts to focus on women's needs in the development process. For example, the government programme offering a stipend for girls entering secondary schooling recognises the need for extra encouragement to make sure girls continue their schooling. It is not that the girls themselves lack motivation – parents often tend to think that it is not worth investing in a girl's education since she will bring no income to the family. If school fees are paid, such economic considerations no longer act as an obstacle. Scholarships may also encourage parents to postpone their daughter's marriage in order to let them complete their schooling.

Special attention has also been given to women with regards to credit. Most of BRAC and Grameen Bank beneficiaries are women. The Grameen Bank approach, for example, of taking the bank to the people by having bank staff visit the beneficiaries in their home, is designed to help women especially. Rather than leaving their children at home to walk for miles to reach an intimidating office, the women can carry out their banking transactions within familiar surroundings. The purpose of making credit more accessible to women is to provide them with greater economic independence and decision-making power within the household.

These are a few examples of how development projects may attempt to readress the imbalance in the flow of resources between men and women. Such programmes concentrate on women's specific needs and acknowledge their disadvantaged position in society.

Such special treatment of women may seem to be against the feminist goal of equality between the sexes. But, as mentioned earlier, to allow women to catch up with men, development planners and workers must now strive for equity, not just equality. The concept of equity highlights the fact that equal treatment is not always just. At present men and women find themselves at different stages of the development process. Men have higher rates of literacy, better health, greater access to resources such as land and credit, greater access to the services provided by the government or NGO's greater ability to take part in political processes, more opportunities for involvement in economically profitable activities than women. In such a situation, treating everyone equally i.e. not differentiating between men and women, will only perpetuate the existing inequality.

By mutual effort of both men and women this miserable condition is possible to remove. Just have a look all around! Women are half of the total population. But they are not considered as complete beings. The distinction between men and women continue.

If we just turn our eyes to the natural world we see it is so ordered, big and broad. Women must not be confined only to the kitchens and other domestic affairs. The participation of women in all spheres of life will unfold a wide world.

There is a group of people who will always try to deprive women of their natural rights. As a result social as well as total world development is harassed. It is necessary to bring a radical change in attitudes towards women. Men-women relationship can be promising if the idea of dominance on the part of men is changed. The society can be an ideal institution if it just leaves the motive to suppress women. The social laws must flourish in both personal and institutional levels.

But there will be a radical change which will cut all those bonds that make women prisoners. "Sultana's Dream" will no longer be a dream but an existing reality.

This world is a beautiful place and in this world human beings are the superior beings. So, naturally their activities would be remarkable too. Men and women are to share the beauties and charms of this world. And together they can build a utopian world one day.

Everybody wants to possess an identity of his or her own. By mutual efforts one day women will have a personality of their own and the world on the whole will be seen in a different way.



Learning three R's — photo: Unicef

that they do not think a woman would be capable of performing their job and would feel uncomfortable receiving orders from a female superior. We have to wonder how such workers could ever strive for gender equality amongst their target group when it does not even exist within their own organisation?

Thus the need for gender training workshops such as the one run by Naripokto becomes clear. Its purpose is to make development workers aware of the mechanisms of sexual discrimination in built within most projects. Discrimination may not be intentional to 'keep women down'. Most people in Bangladesh have simply been brought up with the notion that it is a woman's natural role to cook and care for her husband and family. When in development projects, it is taken for granted that a woman stays at home to bear

not start and end with caring for a family, that she has a life of her own and thus capabilities, weaknesses, dreams and expectations of her own, they may help create a suitable environment in which women can gain an awareness of their strategic interests i.e. those interests which relate to changing their position in society. The lessons learned are not to be applied only among their project beneficiaries but apply equally to relations with women in their own workplace and also to their personal lives.

It is increasingly clear that it is not enough simply to treat men and women equally, though that in itself is a major improvement on the current situation. To actually achieve equal status for men and women, the latter need to be given special consideration in the years which we ahead, simply to make up for centuries of discrimination against

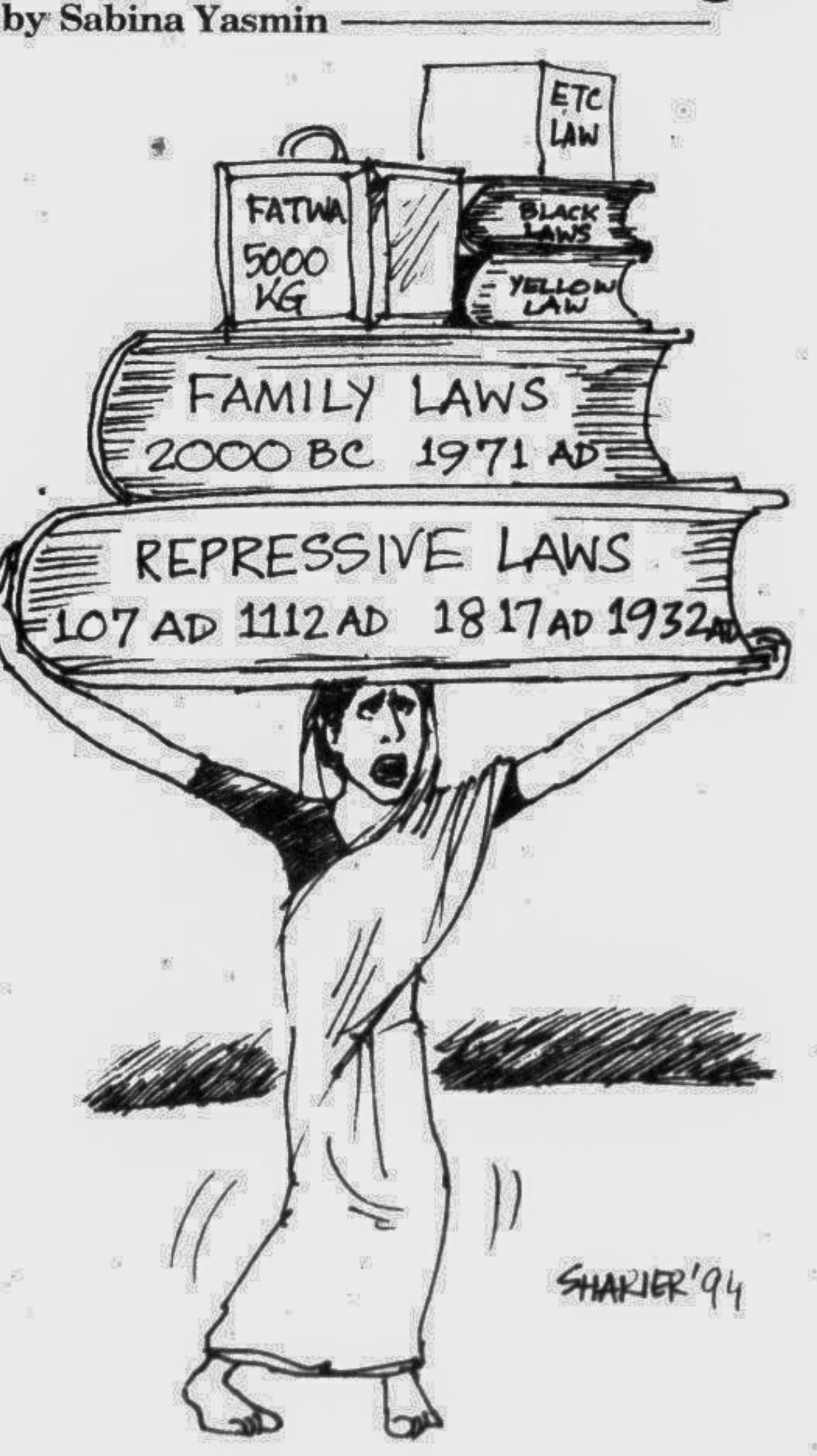
## Freeing Them from Bondage

by Sabina Yasmin

SOCIETY imposes certain rules and regulations in the path of women's activities. They face various obstacles all through their lives. Women face problems in expressing themselves in the ways they want to. They are deprived of their rights both consciously and unconsciously. It is a pity that the women's lives is decided by the dominate male class. Women are made to rely on men for various supports – food, clothes, shelter and even emotion.

Since ancient time women have been relying on men. Society teaches women to rely on men for various reasons. So, the question which comes naturally is – what is a society? Society is an institution where certain rules and regulations are made by men. They are the patrons of the society. And this society becomes an effective weapon against women. The existing stereotyped customs of society warn women against saying or doing anything against the well-established systems. Women are treated as an incomplete personality. Social systems has turned into something outrageous. Women strive all through their lives to get an identity of their own. From the very beginning of their lives certain mannerisms are imposed on women like the necessity to be calm, quiet, meek and gentle. Women have to submit to the conventions no matter how unbearable it is. Because this is the way of the world!

In such a condition what can be done? The responsibility is both on women and men.



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