

The Impact of COVID-19 on Low-Income Women Workers in India

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### **Abstract**

The novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has had an unprecedented impact on the health, livelihoods, and economies of people and countries throughout the world. Unarguably, one of the worst sufferers in this crisis are the working poor, for whom these testing times pose not just a health concern but more importantly, a danger to earn their income and have adequate access to food and shelter. In India, the pandemic and the consequent national lockdown have proven to have adverse effects on low-wage workers, and amongst them, women seem to be faced with a unique set of battles. This paper aims to evaluate the multifaceted impact of the coronavirus pandemic on low-wage women workers in India under the parameters of employment, food security, safety, and social and financial autonomy. Drawing from various surveys, case studies, and government records, this paper aims to study the ways in which gender becomes an important field of analysis vis-a-vis a pandemic's effect on a low-income population, and the measures that can be taken to mitigate this crisis.

*“Experience from past outbreaks shows the importance of incorporating a gender analysis into preparedness and response efforts to improve the effectiveness of health interventions and promote gender and health equity goals.”*

– Gender and COVID-19 Working Group, *The Lancet*

### **Introduction: Pre-Pandemic Status of Working Women**

According to *World Bank*, India has one of the lowest female Labour Force Participation Rates (LFPR) in the world with female workers constituting only 23% of the total labour workforce in the country (2017-18). Most women who work in rural areas are self-employed in agriculture, and in urban areas, domestic work and textile-related jobs are the most common professions.<sup>1</sup> Around 60% of these low-wage women workers are employed in an unorganized capacity, and deal with the issues of low pay, extra burden of work, long working hours, lack of holidays, ill treatment, lack of welfare facilities, absence of bargaining power, poor working conditions, discrimination, malnutrition etc. The average employed Indian woman worked 44.4 hours per week (in the April-June 2018 period) as against the developing country average of 35-36 hours, as per ILO estimates. *Livemint* reports that the unadjusted gender wage gap—the gap in the earnings of men and women in regular, salaried jobs, without accounting for differences in hours worked and educational qualifications—was significant. In rural areas, a male salaried employee earned nearly 1.4 to 1.7 times a female salaried employee, while in urban areas, salaried men earned 1.2 to 1.3 times a salaried woman.<sup>2</sup>

These working women also often bear the brunt of performing the vast majority of unpaid household and care work, which often leads to undernourishment and psychological

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the data of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) published by the NSSO. (Can be accessed here: <http://mospi.nic.in/publication/annual-report-plfs-2017-18>)

<sup>2</sup> See the full report at <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/india-s-workforce-is-masculinising-rapidly-1560150389726.html>

stress, especially with increased demands on their time. A majority of low-wage women workers in urban cities are migrant workers who also carry the responsibility of sending remittance back to their families in the villages, more so if they are single mothers. Another major hindrance to gender and work equity in the country is food insecurity and malnutrition among informal women workers. An estimated 4% of the GDP loss is accounted to malnutrition in the country – a big component of which is food insecurity among low-wage women workers, especially pregnant and lactating women. These issues, coupled with the fact that India fared poorly in the UN Gender Inequality Index before the pandemic started (ranking 122 of 162) also pose a test for the full achievement of the United Nations Agenda 2030<sup>3</sup>, particularly for Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality). India is lagging on SDG 5 targets, as per the *Niti Aayog*'s SDG Index 2019<sup>4</sup>. Now that the pandemic is underway, it threatens to further push back the achievement of said objectives.

### **Examining the Impact of COVID-19: The Current Scenario**

#### *Unemployment*

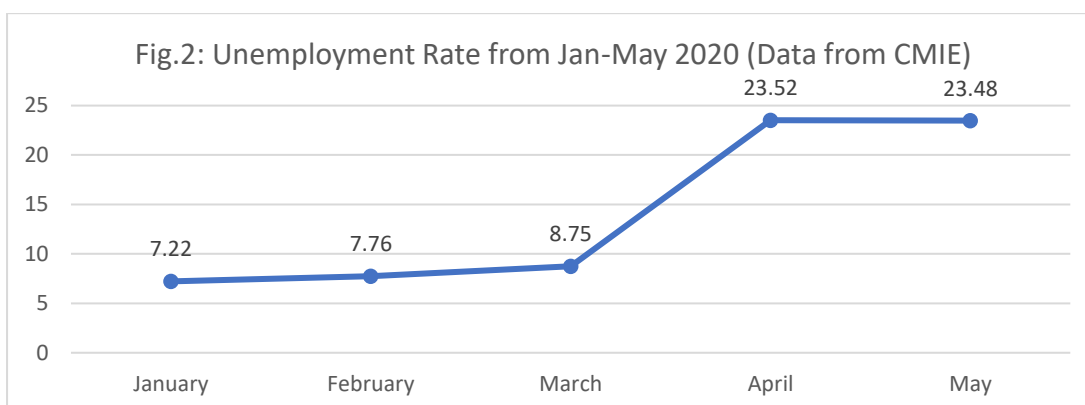
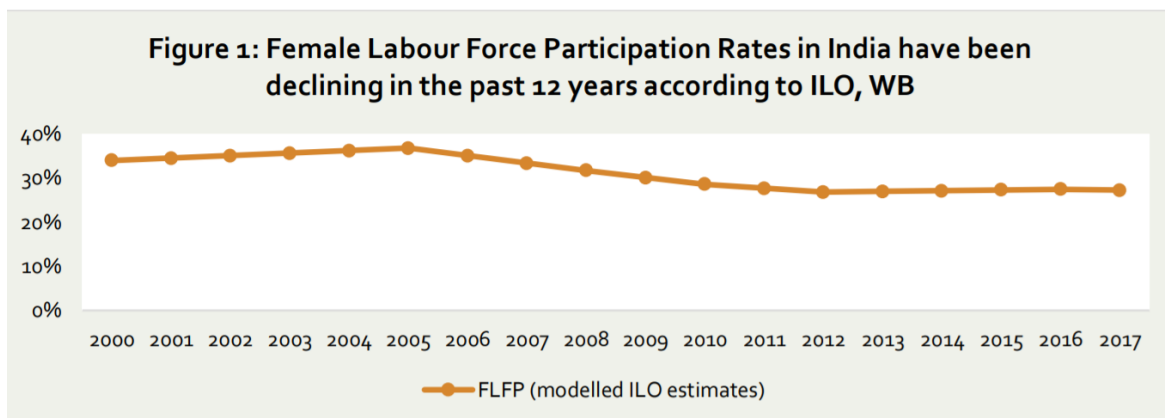
As per the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE), India's unemployment rate in April-May 2020 was at a new high of 23.5%. There was a sharp fall of at least 9 million in the workforce between the months of January and March, 2020. This unemployment has specifically had a striking impact on low-income women workers, with increasing lay-offs and job cuts. As these cutbacks rise with the financial lockdown, women are seen as the first ones to be removed, due to inequalities, in access to technology and skills. With more than 60% of women employed in the informal sector, according to Public Affairs Centre (PAC), options like working from home and virtual workspaces are not viable.

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<sup>3</sup> More Information on UN agenda 2030 Goal 5: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>

<sup>4</sup> SDG Index 2019 report: <https://niti.gov.in/sdg-india-index-dashboard-2019-20>

These economies will simply do away with female employees. Such was the case for domestic and garment factory workers, as will be explored further in the paper. Besides, the urban-rural migration could possibly displace women employed in agriculture, as men return to take over. (Sivaraman, 2020)



A *Financial Express* report notes the following:

“The ILO, in Rapid Assessment of the Impact of the Covid-19 crisis on Employment, has warned that ‘those who are most likely to lose their work and incomes are casual workers and the self-employed’. What is worrisome is the fact that around three-quarters of employment in India is non-regular—either self-employed or engaged in casual work. It is pertinent to mention here that women are more likely than men, to be in non-regular employment.” (Dhillon, 2020)

### *Food Insecurity and Hunger*

Covid-19 has further worsened India's hunger and malnutrition rates. India ranks low at 102 in the 2019 Global Hunger Index. The imposition of an unprecedented and prolonged lockdown in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought renewed focus on the problems of hunger and food insecurity. With a sudden loss of livelihoods, a vast majority of India's poor are faced with increased food insecurity, hunger and starvation. A number of starvation deaths have also been reported in the media. Low-wage workers, especially women workers – many of whom are migrant workers – are hard-hit. *The Wire* notes that “their embedded informality over labour, land and housing tenure has uprooted and shaken them with loss of income, occupation and habitat, multiplying their already entrenched nutrition vulnerability.”

The declaration of extra allocation of cereal and pulses to about 810 million people under the *Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana* with ration cards is a welcomed step. With studies indicating exclusion and inclusion errors as well as leakage in Public Distribution System (PDS) and estimating a low share of PDS grains reaching the intended, most of these vulnerable groups, however, run the risk of being excluded.

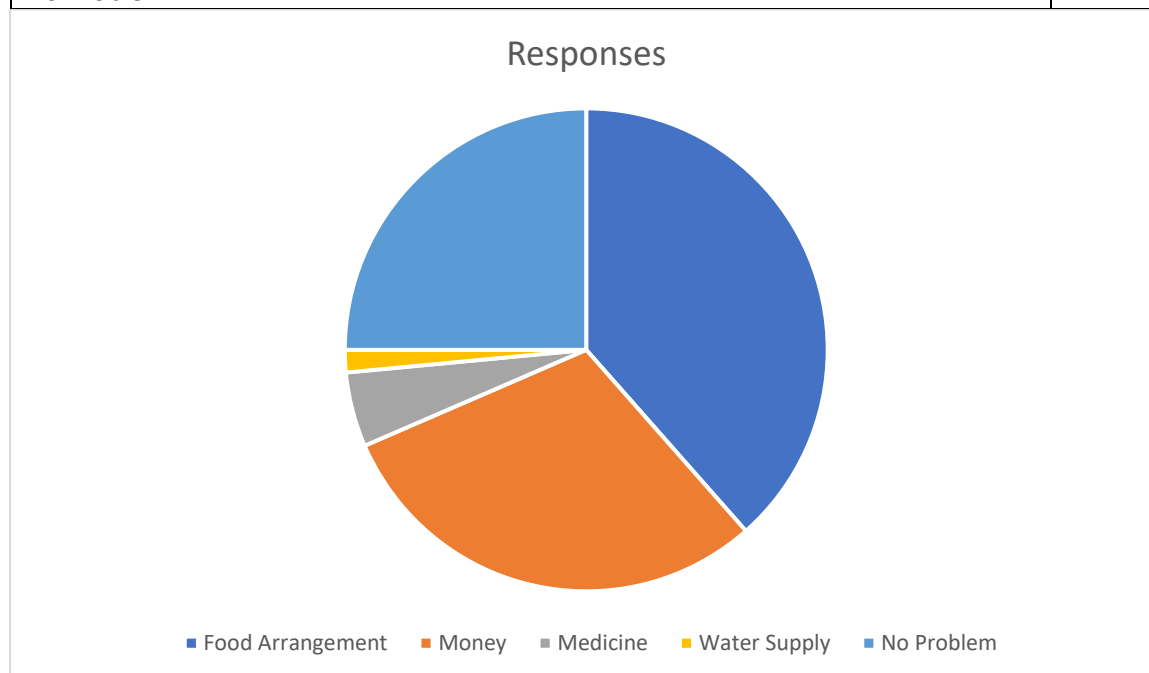
### **In Focus: The Case of Domestic Workers**

According to Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE, GOI) draft National Policy on domestic workers, there are over 20 million domestic workers in India, 90% of whom are women. Large numbers among these domestic workers are migrants from states like Jharkhand, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Odhisa etc, who may be found working in metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, often without their families. *UN Women* observes that these workers hold insecure jobs in the informal economy, especially in

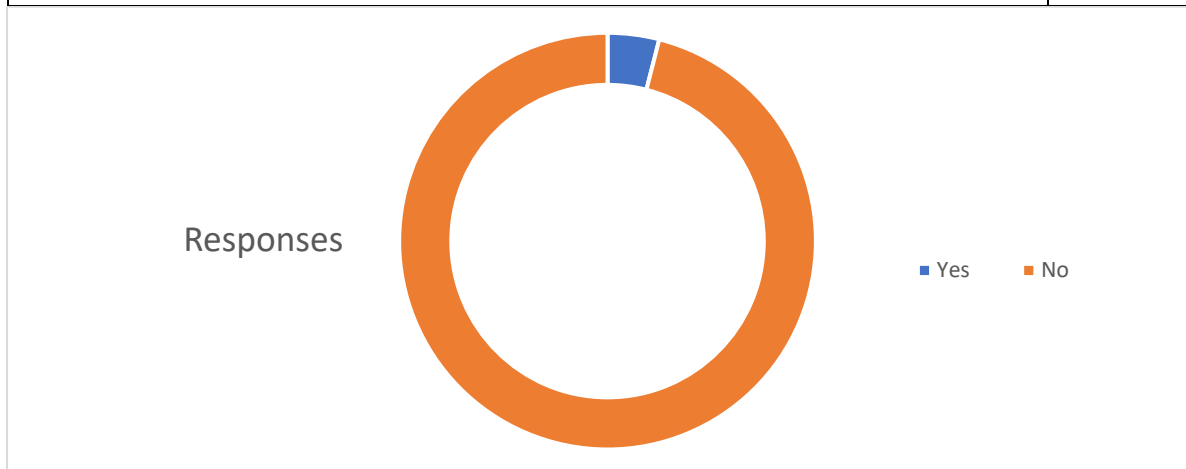
essential but low-paid jobs like cleaning, cooking and washing utensils and laundry in their employer's households. Moreover, they are generally excluded from social protections and insurance schemes, and this leaves them with limited or no access to health care, lost income benefits and other social and economic safety nets. During the current crisis owing to the pandemic and the national lockdown, it is this section of unorganized workers that are losing their jobs at a large scale, not being paid their regular wage, and struggling to procure food and make ends meet.

The Domestic Workers Sector Skill Council (DWSSC) conducted a survey with a random sample group of 200 domestic workers from 8 states viz. Delhi, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Tamil Nadu. Following were some of its findings:

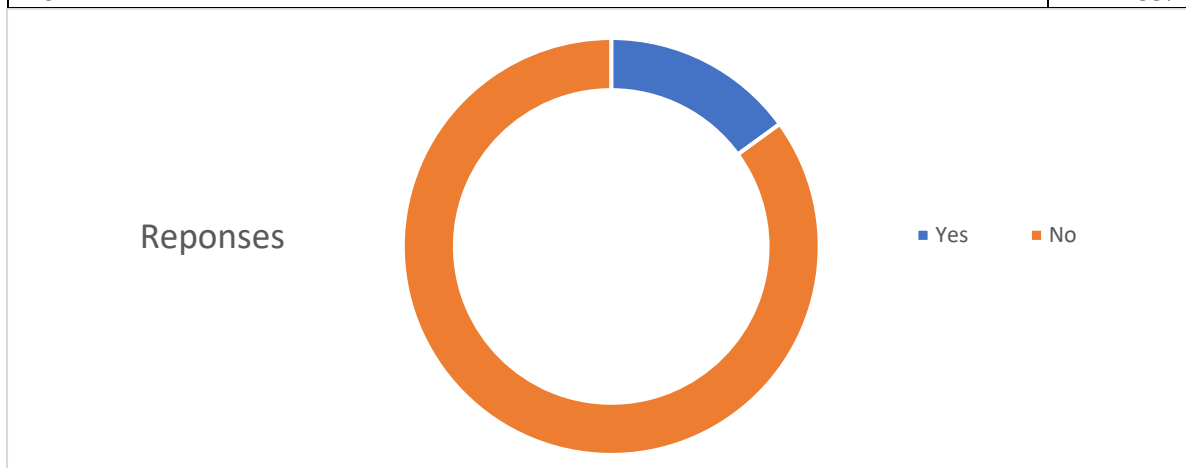
Q1. What major challenges are you facing due to lockdown?	Responses
Food Arrangement	38.5%
Money	30%
Medicine	5%
Water Supply	1.5%
No Problem	25%



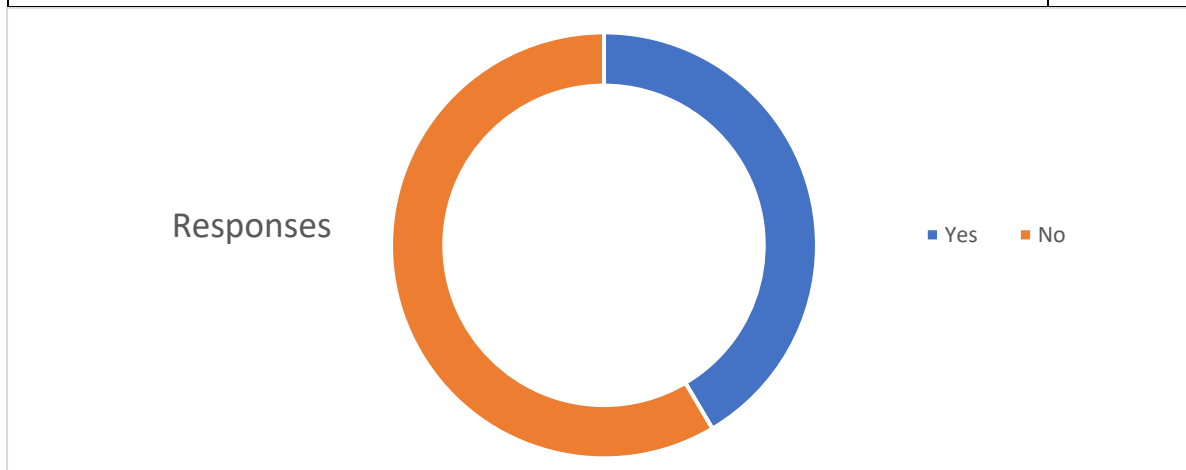
Q2. Are you still going to work in households	Responses
Yes	4%
No	96%



Q3. Is your employer paying for lockdown period, if not working?	Reponses
Yes	15%
No	85%



Q4. Do you know the helpline numbers to avail help provided by the Govt?	Responses
Yes	41.5%
No	58.5%





From the data collected by the survey, one can conclude that the most urgent problems that women domestic workers are facing amidst this crisis are food and money procurement. Additionally, more than 90% workers stopped going to their employer's household during the lockdown period, and 85% of workers were not getting any pay from the employers during their absence. More than half of the women workers who were surveyed also claimed that they were not aware of the government helplines to be able to avail any help from the State.

### **Other Notable Cases: Women Workers in Street Vending and Fisheries**

The impact of the pandemic and its aftermath on women street vendors has been foregrounded through a recent study conducted by the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) and Janpahal. The study aims to understand the impact of the lockdown on paid and unpaid care activities of women workers and also the impact on access to essential resources and services (CJP team). Street vendors are part of a "low-circuit" economy, and out of the approximate 2 Crore (recent numbers estimating to 4 crore) hawkers in India. 1/3rd of this population consists of women street vendors who mostly sell their wares in weekly haats/streets/ roadside stalls or by helping their families / husbands in the back-end work. Since street vending is generally possible in urban India in crowded markets; no wonder that the impact of the lockdown has worst hit this sector. According to the study, 97.14 percent have had a severe impact on their incomes with those running tea stalls, or putting up their wares at weekly markets (haats) having to completely shut down during the pandemic. Only those selling fruits and vegetables, essential items during the lockdown, have continued to sustain their business. Most of the street-vendors have been evicted from their rented homes by landlords as they are unable to pay rent due to the dip in incomes. As many as 54 percent of women workers interviewed for the study had taken loans to sustain themselves during the lockdown and out of those, 37.1 percent have been unable to repay the loans. Additionally, with most of their bank accounts and other government IDs like Aadhaar cards being linked

to the village, most of them lose out on their benefits. A member of Janpahal informed that many street vendors did not have ration cards or any other government documents to avail the subsidised/free food services and information regarding e-coupon for non-ration cardholders was limited.

Fisheries in India is an important sector of food and nutritional security. As per M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), more than nine million active fishers directly depend on fisheries for their livelihood of which 80% are small scale fishers. Fisherwomen form a significant part of this economy. While men may be involved in the actual fishing, the fish markets in India is dominated by women who engage in the economic aspect of commerce in buying and selling. As a result of the pandemic and the consequent lockdown, as well as due to physical distancing norms, only few fisherwomen are able to buy fish from the fishermen in the landing centres. Since the time allotted to sell the fish is very short, they are forced to sell their catch at a low price. For example, if the fish rate was INR 500 per kilogram before COVID-19 lock down, the rate now is just INR 300 to 350. Women fish vendors are considerably affected due to the lockdown as there is no fishing activity, and in some places, only limited boats are fishing. The low catch brought to the landing centre is subjected to high demand. Even when few women purchase affordable amount of fish from the landing centre for street vending, due to the pandemic, people are not purchasing the fish. Customers are also seen bargaining for lower price. Due to this, their income has totally reduced and they are struggling to make ends meet.

#### *Other Issues: Domestic Violence and Health*

In April, Rekha Sharma, chairperson of the *National Commission for Women*, drew attention to the disturbing phenomenon of a reported increase in violence against women during the first phase of the nationwide lockdown in India. Even as the period of lockdown in

India came to be extended, increase in domestic violence continued to be reported from India and across the world. The NCW's statement focused on one of the crucial sites of violence against women – the home – which is the primary site of intimate partner violence (Agnihotri, 2020). Working women, who usually worked outside of their homes for long hours of the day before the pandemic, now found themselves restricted to their homes with, in a lot of cases, their abusive partners. Women workers are also burdened with extra unpaid household work. Reportedly, on a daily average, women tend to do five hours of unpaid care work while men do only 52 minutes.

As per *UN Women*, women who already faced health and safety implications in managing their sexual and reproductive health and menstrual hygiene without access to clean water and private toilets before the crisis, are particularly in danger. When healthcare systems are overburdened and resources are reallocated to respond to the pandemic, this can further disrupt health services unique to the well-being of women, especially marginalised working women. This includes pre- and post-natal healthcare, access to quality sexual and reproductive health services, and life-saving care and support for survivors of gender-based violence. The health impacts can be catastrophic, especially in rural, marginalized and low-literacy communities, where women are less likely to have access to quality, culturally-accessible health services, essential medicines or insurance coverage.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen how the current unprecedented times of socio-economic upending of society and personal lives, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Indian national lockdown have impacted low-income women workers in India. With an already declining Female Labour Force Participation Rate and increasing unemployment, the future of poor women in work is in a precarious state. With the projected recession of economy, the

situation of informal women workers employed in the unorganised sector becomes more acute. There is a need to include women and women-centric problems in the strategizing of Pandemic Response and policy formulations. The WHO Executive Board has recognised the need to include women in decision making for outbreak preparedness and response, since there is inadequate women's representation in national and global COVID-19 policy spaces and task forces.

The nature, outreach and performance of social schemes need to be expanded given the current situation. Employment in the formal sector will help women get access to benefits under various legislations. Besides, supply-side reforms to improve infrastructure and address other constraints to job creation could enable more labour force participation. As Financial Express notes, “budgetary allocations to social sectors need a big push, including investment in education, which can lead to higher female labour force participation in the long run.” Additionally, the implementation of existing schemes and relief packages should be rolled out effectively to help mitigate the crisis and its effect on low-income vulnerable social groups.

We have learned from the histories of past pandemics that women and women workers take longer than their male counterparts to recover economically and socially from these crises. *Lancet* notes that during the 2014–16 west African outbreak of Ebola virus disease, gendered norms meant that women were more likely to be infected by the virus, given their predominant roles as caregivers within families and as front-line health-care workers. Women were less likely than men to have power in decision making around the outbreak, and their needs were largely unmet. For example, resources for reproductive and sexual health were diverted to the emergency response, contributing to a rise in maternal mortality. There is a need, therefore, to learn from the past and call for a holistic, gender-sensitive, and all-inclusive approach to our redressal and response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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