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Gendered Class Struggles and Marxist Feminist Interventions: An Analytical Discussion

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Abstract

In African societies, the class struggle cannot be separated from the gendered realities of colonial legacies, patriarchal societies, and capitalist systems. Women are the essential carriers of unpaid reproductive labour, including taking care of families and administering homes, whereas men experience enormous psychological and economic pressures to be the providers. This paper examines how class and gender intersect to perpetuate inequalities among both men and women, utilising Marxist feminism as the analytical framework. Drawing on African literary texts such as Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die*, Ukamaka Olisakwe's *Ogadinma*, and Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*, the study examines how the lived experiences of exploitation and resilience are portrayed in literature and reflect real social conditions. The analysis also combines statistics and policy-related knowledge to strengthen the argument for radical interventions. The recommendations include acknowledging and compensating unpaid work, revising gender-based workplace rules, and addressing the culture of toxic masculinity through education and community initiatives. Drawing on theoretical reflection, literary analysis, and substantive suggestions, this paper proposes an intersectional reconsideration of justice: changing the conception so that class and gender are not viewed in isolation from one another but are instead viewed as interacting forces that have to be addressed simultaneously in order to see any genuine chance of success.

Keywords: capitalist, equity, gendered class struggle, intersectionality, Marxist, feminism, reproductive labour, patriarchy, social justice

1. Introduction

Karl Marx has notably referred to the world as a battle of two classes between the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production, and the proletariat, who have to sell their labour to earn their livelihood. This concept of class struggle has remained central to the interpretation of exploitation within the structure of capitalism, as the commodification of labour and the simultaneous production of profit are carried out through unequal trade between capital and labour. However, while Marx's theory conjectures the economic essence of capitalist domination, it has failed to account for situations where gender influences the exploitation of classes. Class conflicts also assume highly gendered forms in most situations, mostly among African societies that are highly influenced by colonial experiences, patriarchal societies, and neoliberal economies.

This paper contends that the traditional model of class antagonism should be broadened to include gender as a fundamental aspect in the study of scholarship. Marxist Feminism (MF) fills this gap, allowing for a dual critique of both capitalism and patriarchy. It demonstrates how women's unpaid labour within the domestic sphere is used to sustain the capitalist economy by reproducing the workforce, while simultaneously denying women their wages, power, and autonomy (Federici, 2018; Weeks, 2020). Additionally, it examines the influence of societal notions of masculinity on men and how these ideals lead them into harmful, risk-taking roles as breadwinners, as dictated by the hegemonic masculinity ideology (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The African context provides a crucial setting for examining these gendered class dynamics. Colonial legacies introduced capitalist labour stratifications in most countries on the continent, but they also strengthened and reinforced existing patriarchal norms. Post-independence economic liberalisation processes, which focused more on privatisation and scaling back the delivery of public services, contributed to the exacerbation of these systems, playing out unfairly for women (Fraser, 2020; Mama, 2011). However, up to this day, African women continue to be unequally burdened with unpaid reproductive work, subsistence agriculture, and informal work, which is not

included in such national economic indicators as GDP (ILO, 2020). Meanwhile, plenty of working-class African men are stuck in sweatshops, manual labour, and low-paid jobs with few economic guarantees, pressured to be the most masculine of masculine (with the characteristics of masculinity being more of a curse than a gift).

The paper addresses the following question:

How do gendered class struggles manifest in postcolonial African societies, and how can Marxist feminism help illuminate and address them?

To answer this, the paper is structured around three core aims:

1. Theoretically, it clarifies how Marxist feminism conceptualises class and gender as intersecting forms of oppression.
2. Empirically, it draws on African literature and statistical data to illustrate how class-based and gendered inequalities operate in African societies.
3. Practically, it proposes feminist policy interventions for addressing these inequalities, focusing on unpaid work recognition, labour reforms, and gender-conscious social policy.

African literature works are central to this analysis, serving not just as stories but as commentaries on socio-political life in Africa. The novels, like *And They Didn't Die* by Lauretta Ngcobo (1990), *Ogadinma* by Ukamaka Olisakwe (2020), and *Morountodun* by Femi Osofisan (1982), offer powerful illustrations of gendered labour exploitation, political marginalisation, and the weight of patriarchal expectations. In Ngcobo's narrative, Jezile is subjected to unpaid care work and agrarian labour in apartheid South Africa, highlighting the economic invisibility of women. A culture of obedience and economic dependence, alongside institutional neglect in *Ogadinma*, renders Ogadinma's character de-autonomous. Conversely, male characters created by Osofisan demonstrate that even men, especially those from working classes, are victims of capitalist labour regimes and the demands of dominance that impair their emotional and physical well-being.

These literary descriptions confirm what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) has described as intersectionality, a concept that posits identities (e.g., gender, class, race) interact in a way that creates specific, compounding modes of oppression. When transferring Marxist feminism to an African setting, it allows viewing the ways through which systems of economic exploitation are perpetuated not only by the regimes of class stratification but also by the rules and norms of gender and social expectations.

The final section of this paper utilises the thinking of the Marxist feminist in proposing practical policy steps based on that thinking. These are (1) inclusion of the Unpaid Work Index (UWI) in national economic planning in order to acknowledge household labour, (2) equal treatment of equal labour by labour laws, and (3) developing educational curricula and reshaping men and gender roles. Not only is the presumed idealistic, but such interventions will also provide practical solutions based on feminist theory and the African experience.

2. Gendered Class Struggles in Economic Contexts

In African economies, economic inequality is not a shared experience, as it is gendered, structured, and tied to deep-rooted systems of patriarchy and capitalism. Although both women and men are exploited by classes, the burdens they bear are becoming dissimilar because of their positioning. Women, especially in rural and low-income environments, often hold the most unpaid, hazardous, and least recognised jobs within the workforce. These include domestic labour, informal trade, small-scale farming, and care work, which are all forms of labour critical to the functioning of the society but are systematically underestimated and thus not accounted for in gross domestic product (GDP) (ILO, 2020).

In sub-Saharan Africa, women spend, on average, 3.4 times as many hours as men on unpaid domestic and care work (IDRC, 2023). This includes childcare, cooking, fetching water, caring for the elderly, and housekeeping. Silvia Federici (2018) has expressed the view that this is unpaid labour in reproductive activities that underpin capitalistic accumulation. It restores the labour force both in one day and from generation to generation, maintaining the process of wage labour. However, the women who perform this labour are still outside the realm of the official economy. Bhattacharya (2017) extends this criticism further, highlighting that the factory floor is not the only space where capitalism exists, but rather a space that extends into the home through activities such as cooking, cleaning, emotional support, and unpaid nurturing.

These economic mechanics are further supported by the cultural norms prevalent in most African societies, which typically assign almost all domestic chores to women. Rural African women, in particular, often face a "double burden" of caring for their children and elderly relatives while also engaging in low-paid or unpaid agricultural work. In Uganda, nearly 27% of registered land is owned by women, yet 70% of the women are engaged in

agriculture, and surprisingly, less than 20% control outputs of their efforts (CARE, Uganda, 2016). This results in women being economically incapacitated, dependent, and politically marginalised without access to land or capital. This marginalisation is both practical and mental: it reinforces the idea that women's work is secondary or auxiliary, rather than primary.

These injustices are vividly portrayed through literature on the African continent. In the novel *And They Didn't Die,* written by Lauretta Ngcobo (1990), the main character, Jezile, engages in both productive and reproductive labour: by day she serves on colonial farms, and by night she serves in the home. Her financial contribution is often hidden, and her independence is limited by laws that do not grant her property rights, freedom of movement, or opportunities for paid work. To prove her point, Federici argues that women's work is "appropriated by the state, by capital, and by men."

Similarly, Ukamaka Olisakwe's *Ogadinma* (2020) presents a modern urban example of gendered economic dependence. Patriarchal control, economic manipulation, and a lack of agency shape Ogadinma's life. She is denied an education, economically abused by her father, and finally bullied into a marriage of abuse in the name of "family honour." Her story reflects the mental and economic impacts of women being deprived of financial freedom and location mobility.

However, it does not have to be only women subjected to the pressures of gendered capitalism. Working-class and poor men, in turn, are trapped by their own version of capitalist bondage, created by what has come to be known as hegemonic masculinity, a group of norms by which the ideals of manhood and its relationship to money, power, dominance, and emotional coldness are all defined (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Men are commonly pulled into these desolate, low-wage jobs in mining, building, and long-distance transport, with physical risk institutionalised and emotional sensitivity pushed under stigma.

In Femi Osofisan's play *Morountodun* (1982), men trapped in situations that exploit them find their efforts useless and are reduced to mere cogs in the economic machine. They are driven to engage in strikes, resistance, or violence, not only for political reasons but as a last-ditch assertion of masculinity in a system that dehumanises them. Osofisan demonstrates that men are also victims of capitalist logic that measures their worth by their productivity, strength, and ability to provide. The play dismantles the idea that patriarchy is equally advantageous to all men; instead, it highlights how class and gender together expose male workers to systematic abuse, burnout, and disillusionment in a system that offers no real promise.

Economic oppression against men can be more hidden, as it is regarded as acceptable under these societal norms of what men are supposed to do. As Fraser (2020) puts it, capitalism logically takes advantage of both masculine and feminine positions because women do most of the housework unpaid, on the one hand, and it exploits the overwork and sacrifice of men who get wages, on the other.

These sex-based economic burdens are no abstraction; they are in the daily figures. In Kenya, women receive 30% less pay than men for performing similar tasks in the informal economy (BDA, 2023). On average, men in South Africa earn around R7,500 per month, compared to women at R4,800 (Stats SA, 2020). Women are kept in the box of economic invisibility, even despite being very productive individuals in the country, yet on the other hand, the men are forced to live with impractical standards.

Table 1. Gendered Economic Roles in African Contexts

Labor Type	**Predominant Gender**	**Average Pay (if any)**	**Societal Value**	**Risk Level**
Domestic Work	Women	Unpaid	Low	Low
Informal Market Trading	Women	Low	Medium	Medium
Caregiving (children/elderly)	Women	Unpaid	Low	Medium
Agriculture (subsistence)	Women	Minimal	Medium	High
Mining, Construction	Men	Medium-High	High	High
Transport & Logistics	Men	Medium	High	High

Source: Author's construct (2025)

3. Social and Political Marginalisation Through a Gendered Lens

3.1 Educational Exclusion and Gender Norms

In African societies, educational inequality is a dominant element of social marginalisation among women and girls of working and rural classes. The right to education should not be based solely on financial constraints; in many instances, a deeply ingrained expectation may even govern access to education. In a substantial number of low-income families, particularly those having difficulties with food security or families utilising child labour, boys are often the ones who have priority to educational resources in short supply. Girls, however, are not supposed to be left behind; they are to help with caregiving, domestic duties, and even unofficial income-generating acts like petty trade or farming. Such expectations have been gendered and are part of a larger social script that locates women. According to Torso (2024), in Uganda, only 39% of women have progressed to secondary school compared to 49% of men, revealing how economic class and cultural norms intersect to disadvantage females from marginalised communities.

Gender inequality in access to education extends beyond the classroom in numerous ways. According to Lloyd and Young (2009), the high rates of early dropout among most girls in poor household settings can be linked to girls' domestic duties, early marriage, and the societal tendency to de-prioritise girls' education. Similarly, Van-Wyk (2015) highlights that girls from low-income families in Africa are less likely to complete primary school, especially in sub-Saharan regions. These findings illustrate how poverty and patriarchy interact to create an environment where young women lack the social mobility and empowerment that education can provide. Without proper education, women have fewer opportunities to access skilled jobs, participate in civic life, or oppose oppressive societal systems. In practice, exclusion from education sustains a cycle of dependence, inferiority, and invisibility in both economic and political domains.

This theme of educational disenfranchisement is well captured in the literature on the African continent. The aspect of having little contact with formal education and intellectual independence in Purple Hibiscus (2003) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is not deficient solely because of economic poverty, but also because of the disabling form of authority that her father exercises, a type of authority that centres on religious fealty and patriarchal manipulation. The novel is an indictment of the way the personal hierarchies within families are reflected in the institutional hierarchy of the oppression of women. Instead, in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie introduces female characters in a world where people interact, and women experience the intersection of class, gender, and war as a socio-political insecurity, facing over-represented educational and career-related losses. These literary discourses highlight the fact that education is not merely a scholastic undertaking; it is a form of politics in which gendered class disparities are created, sustained, and sometimes challenged.

The impact of educational exclusion extends beyond the immediate. The long-term consequences include women's overall failure to enter knowledge economies, participate in the governance of institutions, and escape cycles of poverty within their communities. Without basic literacy, women are denied not only access to classrooms but also a place in history-making spaces. This institutionalised exclusion underpins broader political and civic brutality, which should be recognised not merely as a developmental issue but as a matter of social justice.

3.2 Political Disenfranchisement of Women

Inextricably tied with the education gap is the fact that even with the ushering of democracy in several African countries, women are still being sidelined politically; this is despite the existence of affirmative action policies. Although the efforts by some countries, such as Rwanda and South Africa, to enhance the representation of women in parliaments have been successful due to the mandates contained in their constitutions, most of sub-Saharan Africa still records massive gender gaps in political leadership. As of 2024, Gender Links (2024) states that women hold 26% of seats in lower houses and 21% in upper houses, averaging 25% overall across the continent. The situation is not only a numerical underrepresentation issue; it lies in the exclusionary character of postcolonial political regimes that recreate the patriarchal and colonial logic of leaders.

According to Amina Mama (2011), the structure of African political institutions has historically favoured elite, male-led leadership and effectively ignored the voices of women, both in formal and informal aspects of cultural life. When women hold government positions, they are often relegated to ceremonial or what can be called "soft power" roles, where they have little to no influence on fundamental national policy. Moreover, women living or working in working-class or rural areas face even greater challenges in becoming candidates, including a lack of political mentorship, campaign funds, and community support. These obstacles are compounded by cultural ideologies that perceive aggressive women as unfeminine or sometimes dangerous, thereby discouraging their participation and perpetuating political inequality.

This denial is portrayed in African literature, most especially in *And They Didn't Die* by Lauretta Ngcobo (1990), whereby the main character, Jezile, is constantly denied agency by both the apartheid government and her own patriarchal society. The fact that Jezile was sent to prison because of travelling out without permission from her husband says it all as to how mobility is controlled in both political and personal aspects of patriarchal power. Even after her resilience and activism, she is still left out of mainstream political platforms, thus indicating a combination of structural oppression and gender, which disempower women and, in particular, those in the poor rural areas. The story of Ngcobo is a critique of both the colonial state and indigenous power structures, where people do not have equal access to participating in the work of political struggle, even in efforts toward liberation.

Exclusion of women in political life translates to policy settings that do not focus on their agendas, including maternal health, labour rights in the home setting, and cases of gender-based violence. There are needs of women that are often overlooked when they are not part of the decision-making process or are considered secondary needs. This further intensifies gender inequality, and it corrupts democratic representation. Therefore, political disenfranchisement can be described as both an outcome and a contributor to wider injustice in society, which further creates a system of exclusion unless actively unravelled.

3.3 Working-Class Men and Misrecognised Masculinities

While in patriarchal systems, men are given an advantageous and beneficial position under these systems, not everything is accorded the same privilege because it has its issues. In African contexts, masculinity is transformed into a platform of struggle among the working-class men who are exposed to socio-economic deprivation and institutional indifference. Such hegemonic masculinity, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have identified as idealised manhood, where a man who has more control, provides economically, and is stoic, is called upon to bear enormous psychological and social pressures that are inaccessible to poor men. The inability to provide, in a hopeless scenario where masculinity is closely connected with wealth and power, is a creator of humiliation, social isolation, and even violence.

Such a contradiction can be well demonstrated in the literature, especially in *Morountodun* by Femi Osofisan, where there is also a struggle on the part of the male characters to balance the exploitative demands of capitalist labour and to retain their traditional provider roles. In the play, men are depicted as working under harsh and inhuman conditions; they labour in mines, factories, or on plantations, but even their income is insufficient to satisfy societal needs. These men find themselves in a situation where their economic usefulness is used to define their gender, and failure is a crisis. This makes it problematic to assume that men are always advantaged when it comes to patriarchy, wherein Ratele (2013) argues that poor men are usually disadvantaged in a hierarchy that awards those who have elite masculinities and disfavors class-lacking men.

Furthermore, these stereotypical images of working-class men are reinforced by popular culture and media, which often portray a working man as either lazy or unemotional. These images are distorted by structural constraints that shape their behaviour and explain why they still lack access to policy and leadership arenas. For example, poverty alleviation or inclusion programmes rarely consider the specific vulnerabilities of poor men and tend to operate on a binary paradigm where female victimhood and male privilege are the only concepts. This erasure results in a gendered form of neglect, leaving working-class men without institutional support and subjecting them to cycles of unemployment, substance abuse, and domestic instability.

Therefore, women, as well as working-class men, are consistently excluded from the social contract, but in different ways. They are marginalised because of their economic class, but also due to limited definitions and expectations of gender roles, which are centred on elite interests. This dual exclusion should be considered when designing inclusive social policies, as these should also promote equity without reinforcing negative stereotypes.

3.4 Intersectionality and Structural Reform

To analyse social and political marginalisation as gendered, a model must exist that allows the mapping of intersecting and mutually supporting models of oppression. It becomes necessary to go beyond individual criticisms of sexism or poverty to understand how these phenomena overlap and intersect. Here, it is crucial to discuss the concept of intersectionality as provided by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991). Crenshaw argues that identities like race, gender, and class do not exist in isolation but overlap to produce compounded experiences of disadvantage. The working-class woman in the African context is not necessarily poor or female; she embodies both, and the interaction of these characteristics determines the precise contours of her exclusion.

Intersectionality enables us to avoid having to discuss things in black or white terms and instead embrace the way in which systems of patriarchy, capitalism, colonial legacy, and cultural norms interact. An example is a rural teenage female in a conflict-prone territory, in the sense that not only is she marginalised in education because of

her gender, but also more exposed to vulnerabilities because of her geographical isolation, poverty and political instability in the area. Similarly, a working-class urban man can be discriminated against on the basis of gender to be a provider and yet marginalised in political action and even laws that protect such marginalised subjects because of his economic and social status.

This model also redefines feminist and class-based interventions. One cannot simply include women in existing systems without modifying the systems to reflect women's realities. The focus on poverty is also insufficient if it neglects how gender roles contribute to the persistence of economic or social inequalities. Intersectionality necessitates structural changes, policies, and practices that address the diversity of identities and inequalities prevalent in African societies. All education reform, political participation, labour law reform, and public voice should consider these points of connection.

Table 2. Women's Representation Across Governance Sectors in Africa (2024)

Sector	Africa	East	Southern	Central	North	West
Lower houses of parliament 2024	26% (25%)	34% (33%)	29% (28%)	22% (19%)	22% (24%)	20% (16%)
Upper houses of parliament 2024	21% (20%)	34% (29%)	31% (29%)	28% (20%)	10% (11%)	7% (12%)
Parliament overall 2024	25% (24%)	34% (30%)	30% (29%)	23% (19%)	20% (21%)	19% (16%)
Political party leadership 2024	9% (12%)	11% (15%)	19% (16%)	0% (7%)	0% (0%)	0% (11%)
Election Monitoring Bodies 2024	30% (28%)	45% (45%)	39% (40%)	23% (20%)	15% (25%)	27% (27%)
Local government 2024	25% (21%)	24% (35%)	25% (20%)	24% (27%)	26% (3%)	28% (2%)
Speakers 2024	25% (21%)	44% (33%)	43% (35%)	17% (20%)	0% (0%)	16% (16%)
Mayors of capital cities 2024	29% (19%)	0% (0%)	20% (19%)	18% (20%)	17% (0%)	43% (20%)
Top executive positions 2024	15% (7%)	28% (12%)	21% (9%)	11% (7%)	0% (0%)	11% (7%)
Cabinet 2024	24% (22%)	36% (32%)	27% (26%)	18% (20%)	21% (13%)	21% (19%)

Source: GenderLink (2024)

Key=

Increased since 2021

Decreased since 2021

The same as 2021

4. African Literature as a Lens for Gendered Class Struggles

African literature can be seen as a powerful means of highlighting both gendered struggles and class-based conflicts in generation and location. In fiction, playwrights and novelists reveal how capitalism, patriarchy, and tradition combine to influence the lives of women and men, though generally in different yet overlapping ways. These pieces convey the literal and emotional cost of social stratification, displaying not only personal pain but also collective forms of resistance and resilience.

The central character in *And They Didn't Die* by Lauretta Ngcobo, Jezile, practices a multi-fold burden of economic and reproductive roles. She works on the farms of the whites in apartheid South Africa, combines the domestic chores and child rearing, and evades the cultural confinements on women's autonomy. Her work helps sustain the colonialist economy, just as it supports her community; this work is not only unpaid but also unrewarded. The case of Jezile can be reduced to what Silvia Federici (2018) refers to as reproductive labour, which is essential work that is non-economic. Even though the class systems exploit women like Jezile, they are not merely exploited. However, they are also marginalised in gender roles since they are left out of decision-making and political roles by patriarchal rules.

However, Ngcobo tells the story where the struggles of women are not secluded. Men, as well, are exposed to pressures regarding economic survival and masculine identity. The male characters in *Morountodun* by Femi Osofisan are thrust to the front lines of the labour demonstration, where death, violence, and imprisonment are at stake. Nevertheless, these men of privilege seek dignity and financial equity. These are not oppressors per se, but also victims of a system that only appreciates these men through their productivity. This can be particularly explained in terms of Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which captures the process of socialising poor men in such a way that they display control and stoicism, despite being vulnerable to

structural constraints. Thus, Osofisan does not create a paradox of male suffering against patriarchy but an offspring of it, with economically capitalist and patriarchal demands coming together to break the ground under the uneven-footed.

An additional layer of complexity to this narrative is provided by Ukamaka Olisakwe's novel *Ogadinma*, which raises the issue of generational and cyclical types of gendered oppression. Similar to Jezile, Ogadinma is deprived of both educational and economic opportunities and forced to comply with the framework imposed by the family and society. Her mother experiences a similar story that depicts how the disempowerment of women is not accidental but institutionalised. Ogadinma does this just as Jezile does; however, Ogadinma can find her agency and, despite it all, starts resisting, which demonstrates what Amina Mama (2011) calls the subversive potential of women who challenge imposed roles through simple, mundane courage and disobedience.

The connection between these stories is not that men and women experience suffering, but that their suffering is marked and compounded through overlapping systems of class and gender, as theorised by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). African literature brings these intersections to life, not just conceptually, but through vivid characters, social contexts, and powerful emotions. The compelling human characters of men created by Jezile, Ogadinma, and Osofisan demonstrate that, as a common factor, class influences are weighted differently along gender lines. Invisible, unpaid labour is often associated with women, while men bear the burden of work and provision. Their loads are cumulative, yet they are not shared equally among them.

Notably, the stories also highlight unity and struggle. In *And They Didn't Die*, women unite against both the patriarch and the system of apartheid. In *Morountodun*, women and men stand together against unjust labour systems, illustrating how class interests sometimes cross gender boundaries. These alliances demonstrate that the fight against exploitation does not need to be gender-specific; instead, it can be united through a shared humanity and a common drive for emancipation.

5. Conclusion

Reconsidering the concepts of class and gender in an African context, this paper highlights how economic and patriarchal hierarchies are fundamentally interconnected and thus can determine the lives of all, including women and men. Following the tradition of African literature, the paper has demonstrated that women are systematically subjected to devalued reproductive work and social subordination, and men, despite the apparent male privilege perpetuated by patriarchal authority, have to struggle with financial misery and the stress of living under the rule of masculine supremacy. Viewed through a Marxist feminist perspective, these overlapping oppressions not only become visible but are also reconfigured into structural inequalities that necessitate systemic remedies. As a result, the research promotes the introduction of policies that acknowledge and compensate unpaid care work, the extension of labour protection to informal economies, and the reshaping of education to challenge the stereotypes centred on gender. Laws should be participatory and inclusive, such that the affected communities are involved in the development of the interventions. Finally, social justice in African societies must entail a two-dimensional promise of both class justice and gender equality, as only this will lead to meaningful change in society, where everyone feels free to live with dignity, autonomy, and opportunity.

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