



Ending child marriage is achievable.

THEMATIC REVIEW

5
GENDER
EQUALITY



PROGRESS

A world without child marriage is achievable. Since the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the world has made significant strides towards SDG 5.3—ending child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU).

With governments committed to international, regional and national initiatives focused on achieving this target, an estimated 25 million marriages have been prevented globally in the last decade, and the number of girls married each year is in decline. Previously, 1 in 4 girls (25%) were married before the age of 18, while today, that number has decreased to 1 in 5 (20%).¹

This progress would not be possible without the proactive commitments and investment of governments in collaboration with civil society organisations (CSOs) and stakeholders including children, faith actors, women's groups, survivors and communities. Working together with a shared vision, initiatives have mobilised resources and critical support to protect vulnerable girls, including: increasing the focus of keeping girls in school (SDG 4), growing social awareness about the harms of child marriage,

developing national plans to end child marriage and enacting laws to raise the legal age of marriage to 18.

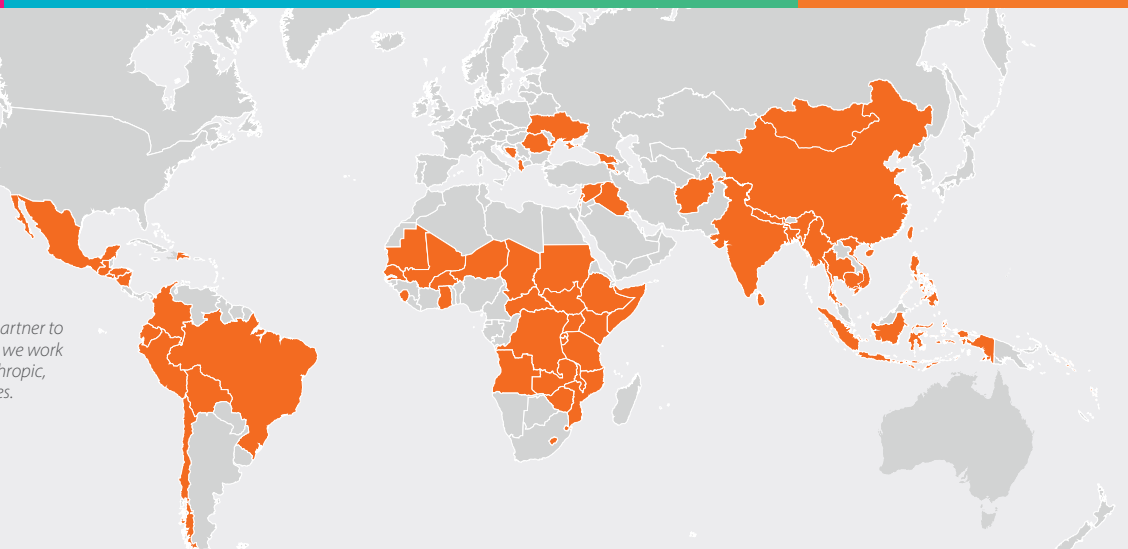
Despite this progress, however, significant gaps remain between the current state of child marriage and SDG targets. Change is happening too slowly. Today, 12 million girls are still given as brides each year,² and if the world does not dramatically accelerate progress and scale up investments, rapid population growth will reverse the gains that have been made.³

Government commitment and action in partnership with civil society organisations and communities—including communities of faith, children and their families—must be scaled up to achieve our shared goal of a world without child marriage.

WORLD VISION FOOTPRINT

CHILD PROTECTION ROADMAP

World Vision country offices may partner to address CEFMU in countries where we work through advocacy, grants, philanthropic, or sponsorship funded programmes.



GAPS

Child early and forced marriages and unions represent a severe form of violence against children on a global scale. Despite government intention, actions and legislation to prevent child marriage, progress towards the end of child marriage is not progressing quickly enough.

It is estimated that 650 million women and girls alive today were married before the age of 18, with an additional 12 million children being added to this number annually.⁴ At current rates of progress towards SDG 5.3, UNICEF has projected it would take another 300 years to eliminate child marriage.⁵

Despite being illegal in 153 of 198 countries,⁶ child marriage remains most prevalent in the least developed countries (LDCs), with sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia disproportionately affected. In LDCs, the rates of child marriage are double than the global average with 40% of girls married before age 18 (compared to 20% globally), and 12% married before age 15.⁷ Today, 1 in 3 child marriages occur in sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 1 in 5 a decade ago,⁸ evidencing that efforts must be scaled up to offset Africa's surge in population growth.

Child marriage is especially widespread in conflict-affected regions/countries and humanitarian settings. Currently, nine out of the top ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are classified as fragile states.⁹ Likewise, crisis also compounds child marriage rates as evidenced during the Covid-19 pandemic when the greatest surge in child marriage in 25 years occurred globally.¹⁰ According to safeguarding data from local World Vision communities in 2020, child marriages was identified as the reason for significant numbers of girls dropping out of sponsorship programmes.¹¹

9/10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are classified as fragile states.

\$5 trillion economic cost of child marriage globally (cumulative, 2014-2030).

Child marriage comes at a significant cost to children, their communities and countries. Children who marry early have a significantly higher risk of experiencing violence, lower educational attainment and worse health and well-being.¹² According to a study by the World Bank and the International Centre for Research on Women, the financial costs of child marriage are significant for governments, tallying up to more than \$5 trillion, globally (cumulative for 2014-2030).¹³ Most girls married under 18 also will become mothers before they reach adulthood and have more children over their lifetime. For countries, early pregnancy means higher mother and child mortality rates, greater challenges with malnutrition and costly burdens for governments who must provide more basic services for a growing population. Likewise, girls who marry early are less likely to complete their education and have reduced economic opportunities in the future, therefore contributing less to national earnings and productivity.¹⁴

These gaps demonstrate the need for intensified and more focused government action to address root causes. More work must be done, together, to end child marriage for good.

12 million girls under 18 are given as brides annually.

150 million additional girls will be married by 2030 at current rates.





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KEY THEMES

TRENDS IN ADDRESSING CHILD MARRIAGE

Learning from World Vision local efforts to end violence against children—including child marriage

World Vision is working with governments, partners and communities around the world—including communities of faith, children and their families—to delay and eliminate child, early and forced marriage and unions, guided by the assumption that delaying marriages will improve the well-being of adolescent girls and young women.¹⁵ Traditionally, these prevention efforts have prioritised criminalisation of marriage under 18 years and programmes to promote girls' education and empowerment.

Current evidence tells us, however, that to accelerate progress to eliminate child marriage, we must also go deeper. This involves further exploring the root causes that normalise and perpetuate child marriage in societies, examining and addressing legal ambiguities and loopholes that enable the practice to continue despite law, and strengthening coordination of efforts with formal and informal actors to both help prevent further child marriages, and protect girls who have already been married.¹⁶

As World Vision's field offices around the world have undertaken local efforts in programming, research and advocacy to end child marriage, the following themes have emerged from our learnings. Learnings also highlight foundational principles for success including locally driven root-cause analysis and solutions across all themes to end child marriage, drawing on global insights and best practices.

This document further explores four key themes to consider:

1. SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND GENDER NORMS

2. INTEGRATED PROJECTS WITH EDUCATION, HEALTH AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OPPORTUNITIES

3. STRENGTHENED CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS

4. LAWS AND POLICIES

CHALLENGE PERCEPTIONS – TO TRANSFORM THE NORMS

1 Social, cultural and gender norms

RECOMMENDATION:

Governments and civil society organisations must invest in social and behavioural change interventions and approaches that shift harmful social, cultural and gender norms that perpetuate the harmful practice of child marriage.

Establishing long-term partnerships with CSOs in engaging family and community influencers— including traditional and faith leaders, and men and boys—in behavior change is critical to enhance efforts to prevent child marriage.



CURRENT SITUATION

Harmful social, cultural and gender norms underly the root causes that perpetuate child, early and forced marriages and unions. Norms often influence child marriage prevalence and play a critical role in sustaining the practice in communities where traditional beliefs prioritise early marriage as a way to secure economic stability, enhance social standing or preserve family honor. These deeply ingrained customs often reinforce gender inequality, positioning girls as subordinate to boys and severely limiting their access to education, future economic opportunities and the ability to make decisions about their own lives.

In many contexts, the perception of girls as economic or social assets underpins decisions to marry them off at a young age. These marriages are often seen as a protective measure, a way to ensure that daughters avoid potential dishonor or poverty. However, these norms not only deprive girls of their right to education and a healthy childhood but also exacerbate intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality in the long term.

WHAT HAS WORKED

- » To end CEFMU, it is essential to challenge and change the social and gender norms that sustain the practice. Promoting gender equality and shifting societal perceptions of girls can have transformative impacts on communities. By fostering a culture where girls are valued equally, not only can we prevent child marriage, but we can also significantly improve the lives of those girls already in marriage. These changes can enhance married girls' ability to make decisions, improve their social connections and grant them greater economic opportunities. When girls are empowered in these ways, their physical safety in marriage is also likely to improve.¹⁷
- » Collaborating with faith leaders, parents and communities is crucial to this effort.¹⁸ Faith leaders often hold significant influence in shaping community norms, and their support in advocating for gender equality can be pivotal. Social and behavioral change approaches can help communities rethink and challenge the traditional beliefs that have perpetuated child marriage for generations. Through evidence-based community-based interventions and dialogue, harmful gender norms can begin to shift, laying the groundwork for more equitable social structures.
- » Engaging men and boys as strategic partners and allies is another key strategy. Men and boys must be provided with opportunities to learn about the harmful effects of gender-based discrimination and violence and encouraged to reflect on their roles in upholding or challenging these norms. When men and boys are included in efforts to promote gender equality, they can become powerful advocates for change, helping to dismantle the normative structures that sustain child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence.¹⁹



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LEARNING FROM WORLD VISION LOCAL EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE

» In **Mozambique**, research on perceptions and harmful practices related to traditional initiation rites for children has demonstrated evidence to link elements of the traditional practice to an increase in early marriages, early pregnancies and school dropouts.²⁰ This link stems from the initiation practice of teaching children about sex and encouraging them to engage in sexual activity. A locally led World Vision Behaviour Change Model for Initiation Rites (BCM-IR) project in Nacarôa has worked with traditional leaders to shift the initiation practice to remove harmful elements and focus on the child-friendly, traditionally covered topics of hygiene, respect, education and the risks of early unions. At a later age, when they are ready to marry, young people can enter the final phase of initiation and learn about sexual rights. This local learning has led to national discussions to develop a child-friendly initiation rites model that supports preventing early marriage.²¹

» World Vision in **Ethiopia** and **Bangladesh** launched social and behaviour change (SBC) demonstration sites in partnership with consultants associated with Georgetown University to study individual and collective attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that condone violence against children, including child marriage.²² World Vision Bangladesh conducted a barrier analysis and a study that identified the key role of faith, faith norms and faith leaders in ending child marriage, while World Vision Ethiopia conducted a barrier analysis and literature review. The consultants helped each site conduct a social norms assessment which helped identify social norms determinants and informed the design of social norms assessments and interventions to enable prevention of child marriage.

Faith leaders play a key role in social and behaviour change to end child marriage

A World Vision study in **Bangladesh** and **Mozambique** demonstrated that at the community level, faith leaders have the potential to be key actors in influencing social and behaviour change regarding child marriage. The study also found that faith influences may underpin multiple other behaviours in other areas of life such as parenting, family relations and reproductive and sexual matters, particularly in Mozambique.²³ In Bangladesh, respondents who had participated in World Vision activities were 13% less likely to indicate that their faith supported child marriage than other community members, and most survey respondents noted that they followed the advice of their faith leaders and faith congregation members.

In Bangladesh, faith leaders' role in raising awareness of community members against child marriage was noted to be prominent, while in Mozambique, most of the discussion centred around the potential role that faith leaders could play. The study was conducted in communities where World Vision implements Channels of Hope and Celebrating Families—two initiatives that recognise and integrate the role of faith into a community's development journey.

Research in **Guatemala**, **Senegal** and **Uganda** demonstrated a 24% increase in opposition to child marriage alongside strengthening of the protective environment for children in the intervention communities that used Channels of Hope for Child Protection (CoH CP). CoH CP is a project model that seeks to address violence against children by catalysing religious leader's awareness of key child protection issues and mobilising local faith community resources.²⁴

In **Mali**, World Vision worked with faith leaders who resolved not to officiate marriages of anyone below 18 years and have opened a register that documents birth registration of their members.²⁵

In **Zimbabwe**, World Vision engaged faith leaders, parliamentarians and chiefs at local and national levels and worked through the national child rights coalition to contribute to the issuing of a law on ending child marriage, signed by the president in May 2022. The law prohibits and criminalises child marriage to a maximum of five years jail sentence.²⁶

World Vision is committed to continuing our work with faith leaders and communities to further identify, measure, and understand the faith dimensions in social and behaviour change that leads to the end of child marriage and other forms of violence against children.

PREVENT – TO PROTECT

2 Integrated projects with education, health and economic empowerment opportunities

RECOMMENDATION:

Sustain and scale up holistic, contextualised and integrated multi-sector programmes that provide education, life skills, empowerment opportunities, and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education and services for both girls and boys and their supporting communities.



CURRENT SITUATION

Child marriage has lasting consequences for girls, affecting their education, economic opportunities and earning potential, and increasing their risk of violence and poor health. Poverty remains a key driver of child marriage, as many economically vulnerable families view early marriage as a solution to financial hardship or a way to gain economic benefits through dowries.

Addressing the complex issue of CEFMU and its drivers, therefore, requires a holistic, multi-sectoral approach supported by strong child protection systems.²⁷ Prevention and response interventions need to be integrated across sectors to effectively reduce child marriage as well as meet the needs of married adolescents. Additionally, as the drivers of child marriage vary across contexts, these integrated efforts must be tailored to meet local drivers and address norms.

WHAT HAS WORKED

- » **Education:** Keeping girls in school—especially through secondary education—has consistently proven to be one of the most powerful tools in delaying marriage. For each additional year a girl stays in secondary school, her likelihood of marrying before age 18 decreases by six percentage points.²⁸
- » World Vision also has learned that education remains one of the most powerful drivers of gender equality as it leads to the transformation of discriminatory gender

Countries that fail to educate girls to the same level as boys lose over \$1 billion USD annually.

norms and empowers girls. Keeping girls in school also improves the access of women to formal employment and fair compensation in the future, allowing women to build an economic base as an alternative to marriage, and lifting future generations out of poverty.²⁹ One additional year of schooling can increase a woman's earnings by up to 20%.³⁰ Countries that fail to educate girls to the same level as boys lose over \$1 billion USD annually.³¹

- » **Sexual and Reproductive Health:** Access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is another vital component in reducing child marriage; while ensuring access to sexual and reproductive healthcare is critical to both unmarried and already married girls.³² CSE equips adolescents with the knowledge to make informed decisions about their bodies and relationships, helping to prevent early pregnancies—a factor strongly correlated to school dropouts and child marriage.³³ Accessing SRH services and reducing the stigma around receiving health services is essential to ensuring both physical and emotional well-being, which in turn reduce the vulnerability to child marriage.³⁴
- » **Economic Empowerment:** Economic empowerment interventions that provide financial support and livelihood opportunities can reduce the financial incentives for child marriage. Likewise, life skills training programmes for adolescents also have demonstrated that helping young people learn financial skills and envision economic alternatives can reduce the belief that marrying early is a solution to escape poverty.³⁵

LEARNING FROM WORLD VISION LOCAL EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE

In the **Dominican Republic**, World Vision, the Government of Dominican Republic and the Children and Adolescents National Council (CONANI), partnered to implement and evaluate a CSE training programme for girls, boys and adolescents as part of the Take Control and Pause Project. Qualitative and quantitative evidence from the programme demonstrated that following CSE interventions, young people—both girls and boys—were better able to both visualise a more promising future and establish long-term goals that are essential to prevent risky behaviours, and promote responsible and healthy behaviours. Topics of comprehensive sexual education, cause and consequence of pregnancy in adolescence,

healthy behaviours and prevention of early unions were covered, alongside an experiential life-skills project. The project technical evaluation showed a reduction in the belief of young people that marrying early is a solution to escape poverty. The 3,000 adolescent participants, particularly girls, demonstrated a greater awareness of the importance of planning and personal development before making critical life-impacting decisions such as early marriage.³⁶

In **Ethiopia**, adolescent boys and girls (ages 15–18) participated in Aflateen, a rigorously studied financial and social education model, designed to challenge young people to explore their identity and the world around them, and consider topics such as child marriage and social and economic empowerment. Participants demonstrated improvement in healthy decision making in personal relationships, critical thinking about gender roles and financial knowledge and entrepreneurial attitudes. After participating in Aflateen, boys demonstrated a new recognition of challenges faced by their female peers and have begun to advocate alongside them and actively support for girls who are dropping out of school due to child marriage.³⁷

Empowering children as advocates

Empowering children—both girls and boys—with tools, platforms and education to speak out as advocates against child marriage can raise awareness, help challenge norms that perpetuate the practice and influence policymakers to enforce laws that protect them.

World Vision’s five-year ‘It Takes a World to End Violence Against Children’ campaign, strategically focused on deepening our impact in key areas including child marriage, while also working with children to empower them to speak out about these issues. The ‘Just Married Mobilisation’ initiative of the campaign rallied supporters, children and young people to call on governments to ban child marriage, strengthen and implement existing laws and fund services to prevent and respond to child marriage.³⁸

World Vision piloted a Digital Platform Project to amplify the voices of children and adolescents in **Bangladesh** and **Brazil**. In each country, ten sessions were conducted to equip children with the tools to safely engage in digital activism. Topics included social media, blogging, lobbying,

“I was only 12 years old when I joined ‘It Takes a World to End Violence Against Children’ and I have felt a strong connection with the campaign. It gave me opportunities to explore my leadership journey and explore myself. Starting as a young teenager and now as an adult—I’ve done a lot of work. I’ve organised many street dramas and school campaigns and connected my community people with policymakers. I’ve had the opportunity to go speak at the United Nations. Imagine, a teeny girl from Bangladesh meeting with government ministers. I have seen big changes in our community.

Before this campaign, in Bangladesh there were lots of underprivileged areas where girls were not prioritised. But through It Takes a World, we can see that girls are able to sit with decision-makers and are having parity in their families.

This is the main change I can see in my community and I’m very happy. It makes me emotional knowing that the campaign is going to end, but I think our

work is not going to end. We are going to keep working on issues that will help end violence against children.”

—*Dola, Bangladesh*



networking and mass mobilisation. With the newly acquired skills and knowledge, participating children and young people are able to share what they have learned with their peers and create child-led movements to mobilise their communities for local to global change across digital platforms. The Digital Platform Project aims to empower young leaders and provide digital spaces and opportunities for them to oppose violence against children, including CEFMU, and promote change. The project will be scaled up to include more children in other countries and regions and build a globally connected network of collaboration and learning.³⁹

RESPOND – TO RESCUE AND RECOVER

3 Child protection systems

RECOMMENDATION:

Strengthen child protection systems to support the prevention of child marriage and the protection of both unmarried and married children.



CURRENT SITUATION

Preventing child marriage and protecting both married and unmarried children require robust child protection systems designed to safeguard children's rights, ensure their well-being and offer comprehensive support. Systems need to be equipped with effective reporting and referral mechanisms to ensure swift responses to cases of abuse or violence. Strong and inclusive child protection systems are one of the most cost effective and sustainable ways to prevent violence against children while also ensuring that those who have been harmed can be supported to thrive. Robust child protection systems can also provide the architecture to scale implementation of the INSPIRE strategies for violence prevention, reduction and response.⁴⁰

Married girls are 5x more likely to experience sexual violence.⁴¹

500,000 people learned how to access child protection services and information in World Vision communities in 2019.⁴²

WHAT HAS WORKED

- » Strengthening child protection systems means strengthening collaboration between formal and informal actors and building their capacity to address the root causes of child marriage, as well as investing in services that focus not only on prevention but also on protection and recovery. Services must be accessible, confidential, child-friendly and trustworthy, ensuring that young people feel safe accessing the support they need. Girls, whether unmarried or already in marriage, need to have confidence that seeking help will not expose them to further risk, and that services will be provided without stigma, judgment or fear of retribution.
- » Child protection services must also recognise the unique vulnerabilities of girls who have experienced the trauma of child marriage and who are more likely to experience sexual violence, depression⁴³ and social isolation, addressing their mental health, physical safety and social reintegration.

LEARNING FROM WORLD VISION LOCAL EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE

In **Ethiopia**, World Vision has piloted the use of mobile-internet technology to improve confidential reporting of incidents of violence against children and to manage service delivery and follow-up. Piloted with local community and child protection actors, the initiative addresses the challenge that incidences of VAC, including CEFMU, go unreported in Ethiopia—particularly in rural regions. This lack of reporting has been linked to fear of social disapproval in reporting widely accepted traditional practices to law enforcing bodies, and low awareness among communities about child protection.

As a result of the pilot, reported incidences of VAC increased from 112 to 816 in the two regions, and the communities self-reported a decline of harmful traditional practices (including child marriage, FGM, abduction, child labor, etc.). The project also has demonstrated that a functioning system can serve as a deterrent tool when people recognise any VAC can be reported using mobile phones and offenders may be prosecuted.⁴⁴ World Vision is now scaling this digital technology for reporting and managing child protection incidents in Ethiopia.⁴⁵

CURRENT SITUATION

Passing legislation to forbid child marriage is a significant step forward for governments; however, these laws alone are not enough to end child marriage and protect girls who have already been married. Beyond legal reform, countries must support action for enforcement. Laws must also be supported by interventions that address root causes and shift norms that perpetuate child marriage even when it is illegal.⁴⁶

WHAT HAS WORKED

- » Effective laws to address child marriage must be part of a holistic and comprehensive legal and policy framework to encompass all causal factors driving the dynamics behind violence against children.⁴⁷ This framework must be free of any exceptions that fail to protect children (such as age exemptions) and address the root causes driving child marriage within the country, including gender inequality.⁴⁸
- » Without child-sensitive, inclusive and transformative laws, the culture of silence and social acceptance of violence persists. A punitive approach alone may inadvertently shift the social burden and stigma to the children who should be protected, and lead to unintended negative consequences including driving the practice underground all together, beyond the reach of the law. In some countries, a strong emphasis on anti-child marriage laws can distract from complementary and holistic approaches to engage families and communities, promote positive parenting and provide vital support for girls such as health and education.⁴⁹
- » To implement child marriage laws effectively, it is key to do so in consultation with civil society organisations and involve youth and adolescents, placing girls' rights at the centre, and supporting community-based efforts to change social and gender norms which drive child marriage.

LEARNING FROM WORLD VISION LOCAL EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE

In **Zambia**, World Vision was instrumental in advocating for the new child protection law, then played a key role in facilitating its roll out by building capacity of district level and local level child protection groups. They then also worked with informal and traditional chiefs at the sub-national level to change their by-laws to make child marriage illegal until after age 18.

In **Ethiopia**, learnings from rural areas suggest that widespread knowledge of laws and punishments, and an elevated fear of sanctions may provide parents with

FORBID – TO FLOURISH AND THRIVE**4 Laws and policies****RECOMMENDATION:**

Address gaps in legal frameworks and strengthen laws to prevent and protect—not only punish.



some legal pressure that counteracts the social burden of marrying their children.⁵⁰ A 2023 World Vision Contribution Analysis revealed that elders caused more social pressure than fear of the law, emphasising the need for targeted social behaviour-change programmes.⁵¹ The Contribution Analysis revealed that a continuum in the change process—from education and awareness to action—needs to happen at the individual, household, community and system levels. The study also highlighted the dynamic and delicate balance of social norms change, policy change and the implementation of the legal framework to contribute to the prevention and reduction of child marriage, as evidence points to using an education-only approach maybe driving child marriage underground and undermining the outcomes rather than creating desired behaviour change and addressing the root causes.⁵²

153/198 countries have a legal framework that prohibits marriage under 18, yet child marriage is still practiced in 117 countries despite laws.

Source: Pew Research Center

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