

CHAPTER 09

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM WHILE RESPECTING THE RIGHTS AND AUTONOMY OF WOMEN AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

+ “In many ways, [women’s rights are] at a crossroads on the international plane. Feminist communities have engaged and fractured on different understandings and criticisms of the politics of counter-terrorism. Today, working for the dissolution of international conflict, feminism’s marriage with counter-terrorism is a central starting point for a critical and self-reflective praxis on the global stage.”

Vasuki Nesiah “Feminism as Counter-Terrorism: The Seduction of Power”¹

At present the world is gripped with fear of rising violent extremism. Much of it is real but a great deal is also due to media sensation creatively manipulated by the perpetrators. While most of the media’s attention has been on acts of systematic terror committed by groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram and Al Qaida in the name of Islam, it is important to note that the growth in extremist violence is not limited to one religion. Even in the Middle East, crimes have been committed in defense of Judaism,² and

Christian militias exist in many parts of the world.³ In Asia, groups have committed violations in the name of Hinduism and Buddhism,⁴ and in other parts of the world, political ideologies have led groups to take up arms.⁵ What is clear is that extremism in all its forms has had serious impacts on the rights of women and girls. From forced marriage, to restrictions on education and participation in public life, to systematic sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), this escalation in violence and insecurity demands the attention of the women, peace and security agenda.

In consultations for this Global Study, women were very firm in their beliefs. Although research shows that societies that respect women’s rights are less prone to extremism, women felt strongly that women’s rights should not be securitized and should not be seen as an instrumental tool for countering extremism. Rather, women’s rights are an end in and of themselves. When women’s advocacy becomes too closely associated with a government’s counter-terrorism agenda, the risk of backlash against women’s rights defenders and women’s rights issues, in often already volatile environments, increases.⁶ Lessons from such contexts, in which broad-based counter-terrorism efforts have sought to explicitly engage women, indicate that such securitization can increase alienation, heighten women’s insecurity, and create a concern of women being ‘used’ by the government, rather than being empowered to participate fully in society and overcome the barriers they face.⁷


Even while the incidents and events around acts of terror increase, there must also be a word of caution. Extremism must only be of concern to the global community if it ends in violence, hate or violates the rights of others. Freedom of speech in a democratic state requires that different points of view, no matter how extremist, should be allowed expression—except for hate speech. We cannot insist that the whole world has one ideology. Growth and change in a multicultural world will only occur if beliefs are challenged and questioned in light of the very ideals held dear. Fighting extremism cannot be a license to remake the world according to individual understanding of what is correct for any society. Global concern must only be triggered if there is violent extremism that destroys communities and violates the rights of others as set out in international laws and standards.

In a globalized world, it must also be recognized that extremists feed off each other. An extremist burns a Koran in Florida, and there is a riot in Cairo; someone burns a mosque in Rangoon and there is an attack on a Buddhist site in Bihar. Respecting the dignity and autonomy of others is a starting point for the important conversation on violent extremism. The need for political leaders at the international and national level to take a strong stand against hate speech and hate mongering by way of example is also a policy for the international community to consider and foster.

MODERN DAY VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND THE DELIBERATE TARGETING OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Today, unlike in cases in the past, groups like ISIS and Boko Haram are grounding their violence on an ability to govern and control territory. For example, in Dabiq—the magazine issued by ISIS—appeals are made for doctors, engineers, and professionals to engage in *hijrah* (devotional migration) in order to assist in the construction of an Islamic government.⁸ ISIS lures fighters and supporters, including women, from around the world with sophisticated social media campaigns, and promises of meaningful employment. Weak governance institutions, ongoing conflicts, cross-border ethnic and cultural ties, globalized financial and commercial networks, and an impressive command of new communications and information technology platforms have helped violent extremists increase their influence, with specific impacts on the rights of women and girls.

Across religions and regions, a common thread shared by extremist groups is that in each and every instance, their advance has been coupled with attacks on the rights of women and girls—rights to education, to public life and to decision-making over their own bodies. For example, kidnappings of women and girls have come to constitute a deliberate tactic of Boko Haram, to lure security forces into an ambush, force payment of a ransom, or for a prisoner exchange.⁹ Reports estimate that there have been some 2,000 women and girls abducted since the start of 2014.¹⁰

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The abduction of 276 teenage girls from Chibok in April 2014 by the group has been the largest single incident so far, shining a spotlight on the increasing use of this tactic, and triggering an international campaign to ‘Bring Back Our Girls.’ Research also indicates that abducted women and girls held in captivity by Boko Haram experience a range of violations including physical and psychological abuse, forced labor, forced participation in military operations, forced marriage to their captors and sexual abuse, including rape.¹¹

SGBV is also an explicit tactic of ISIS. Mirroring the accounts of Nigerian girls who have escaped from Boko Haram, Yazidi women and girls who have fled from the control of ISIS in northern Iraq have reported horrific sexual violence, and being traded as slaves among fighters. Information gathered by the Iraqi Fact Finding Mission in 2015 points to the crime of genocide against the Yazidi population, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of human rights, including against women and girls. Reports indicate that forced marriage to foreign fighters has become increasingly common in territory controlled by ISIS. This phenomenon has also been observed in internally displaced persons camps, and in neighboring countries, where refugee communities have resorted to measures such as child marriage, removal from school and physical confinement to ‘protect’ daughters and wives.¹²

“Women’s groups are trapped between terrorism and countering terrorism...working in very dangerous context[s] where terrorists [exist] and on the other hand their chances to deliver their voice...[are] shrinking in the name of countering terrorism.”

Respondent to the civil society survey for the
Global Study, based in Libya

The imposition by ISIS of a strict interpretation of Sharia law previously unseen in the Syrian Arab Republic, setting out edicts on all aspects of life, from dress to movement, employment and religious observance, has restricted basic freedoms, particularly for women. Women and girls over the age of 10 must be fully covered when venturing outdoors and are not permitted to be in the company of men outside of their immediate family. Failure to obey is punishable by lashings carried out by the Al-Hisbah morality police, or increasingly by the all-female brigade Al-Khans'aa.¹³ The restrictions are particularly pronounced as the conflict in Syria continues and the numbers of Syrian men killed and disappeared increases, leading directly to a rise in female-headed households in the midst of a systemic oppression of women's rights.¹⁴ Similar mass violations and restrictions on basic freedoms can also be seen in the accounts of women and girls living in northern Mali under Ansar Dine,¹⁵ and in Somalia, under the growing influence of Al Shabaab.¹⁶

The rise of violent extremism is also present among other religions around the world, although the acts are more isolated, less brutal and not as widespread and systematic. Some orthodox Jewish settler communities in Israel, who also place a great deal of restrictions on women's rights, have periodically engaged in isolated acts of violence in Hebron.¹⁷ Christian militias in the West, with an increasing number of copycat websites of white supremacy, also engage in isolated acts of violence as happened recently in Norway and the United States.¹⁸ In Asia, Buddhist extremist groups have targeted Islamic and Christian places of worship and their rise also has consequences for women and girls. Over the past year in Myanmar some of the most controversial mobilization by monks has focused on the passage of a law that restricts interfaith marriages between Buddhist women and Muslim men, in violation of women's right to freely choose their spouse.¹⁹

Despite slow global progress towards gender equality, including through the achievement of targets under the Millennium Development Goals, there are concerns that extremist groups favoring more rigid cultural and religious practices may roll back gains made by women, especially with regards to health and education.²⁰ Hindu extremist groups in India continue to target women and artists

who do not live according to Hindu strictures, as well as members of the Islamic community.²¹ Throughout the world, extremists have perpetrated acts of violence and made threats to the personal security of women in an effort to limit their basic rights including participation in public life. This was powerfully and tragically highlighted in the attack on Malala Yousafzai by the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan.²²

Targeted violence against the rights of women and girls is receiving increasing global attention. Indeed, the UN Secretary-General's 2015 report on conflict-related sexual violence highlights the use of sexual violence as integrally linked with the strategic objectives, ideology and funding of extremist groups.²³ However, even as extremist groups place the subordination of women at the forefront of their agenda, the promotion of gender equality has been an afterthought in the response of the international community. Instead, as extremist groups continue to grow in power and influence, international actors have focused on military and security solutions to stop their progress. This approach is no longer sufficient to address a problem that has changed and evolved.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Women are not only victims, but have long been involved with groups engaged in violent extremism. Their roles vary according to each group and can include conducting suicide bombings,²⁴ participating in women's wings or all-female brigades within armed organizations and gathering intelligence. Women can also be sympathizers and mobilizers through providing healthcare, food and safe houses to violent extremists and terrorists.²⁵ For example, while mothers can be an entry point for prevention efforts, they can also be a source of radicalization. One notable leader of Al Qaeda eulogized his mother on social media saying, "She never asked for my return, rather she prepared and urged me to Jihad."²⁶

In understanding women's desire to become members of violent extremist groups, it is also critical to recognize the nature of women's agency. Research conducted

into why women joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka describe a context in which civil society had been absorbed into a militarized space that offered no outlet for women's grievances.²⁷ Women who were victims of violence and discrimination often felt they had no nonviolent option. Prolonged displacement also affected their decision to join the group. All of these experiences shaped women's political identities, often creating highly committed female insurgents.²⁸

Initial responses to the recent upswing in foreign women traveling to Iraq and Syria to support ISIS²⁹ have perpetuated stereotypes about women and Islam, assuming young Muslim women must be tricked or brainwashed, or only join ISIS to become 'jihadi brides,' and that they would not join if they knew the full extent of ISIS' horrors toward women.

While in some cases women may be motivated by romance or be unduly influenced, others are drawn to groups like ISIS for many of the same reasons as men: adventure, inequality, alienation and the pull of the cause.³⁰ Indeed, a recent study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue outlined three self-identified reasons why women travelled to ISIS: oppression of Muslims throughout the world; desire to contribute to state-building; and individual duty and identity.³¹ However, policy and public discourse rarely acknowledge that women may have such grievances and motivations. For example, European women in ISIS have spoken of how alienation and restrictions on their religious practices back home, like France's ban on wearing burqas in public, helped push them into the group.³² In Western countries, it is Muslim women and girls, particularly in religious attire, who bear the brunt of the Islamophobic attacks and harassment that can increase alienation, as well as, for some, the appeal of ISIS narratives that position the West against Islam.³³

There are women who do join violent extremism movements, some against their will but others with a measure of enthusiasm. They may join, as was mentioned earlier, because of the same root causes that make men join. In addition, coming from conservative families, they may also be seduced by powerful internet advertisement imagery to join extremist groups as

'liberation' fighters. Academics describing such female combatants have spoken about their 'ambivalent agency,' that allows them a certain freedom from family and social restraints though they have to function within a strict hierarchy dominated by men.

At the same time, it is also evident that women are also on the front lines of countering extremist violence. Mothers de-radicalizing their children, women police officers engaging with local communities to prevent violent extremism, female imams preaching religious tolerance, to name a few. The roles of women are myriad. The opportunities to engage however, particularly at senior levels, have been limited. It is also interesting to note that in the most dangerous areas, older women are the only group to be trusted by both parties to a conflict. In Syria, in situations where international and national humanitarian workers are forbidden, older women from the community are the ones who do the negotiating for the humanitarian needs of the community.³⁴

Any attempt to constantly portray women in non-western societies within an extremist frame, as one monolithic group of helpless victims or resistance fighters in states of terror is both incorrect and misses an important dynamic. While there is a conservative backlash in many Asian and African societies, it is also because women are moving ahead, becoming empowered and there is fear that this advance may threaten the social fabric. They are going to schools and universities in ever-larger numbers, they are entering the workforce, and they are becoming tech-savvy with the help of education and social media. Malala's determination and the determination of so many other young women reflect this extraordinary growth in girls' education over the last decade. This is very true throughout Asia where in many societies girls are outperforming boys in educational institutions.³⁵ The Arab spring saw many women also take to the streets and though they may not have taken leadership positions they appeared active, confident and articulate.

The new world promised by globalization and international social media has given access to new ways of thinking and being for middle class and lower middle

class women and girls. Some women do seize the opportunity provided by a changing world and become professionals and activists, remaking their lives and educating their daughters. The new and diverse ways of living in a globalized world are constantly clashing with traditional values and practices. This tension and contestation between the old and the new is present in most of the Asian and African regions. In some countries, these coexist with a great deal of tolerance. In others, they have become sites of terrible and extreme violence and women's rights, women's personal lives and their bodies have become sites of the contestation.

+ “While injustices and inequalities embedded in gender relations are a long-term threat to development and stability, gender equality represents a safeguard to the spread of radicalization and violent extremism. It is critical, therefore, that women’s leadership be tapped into as a critical resource for peace.”

Committee on the Elimination of
Discrimination against Women, submission
to the Global Study

The response by nation states and the international community to international terrorism

The response of the international community to widespread and systematic acts of terror has not been successful for many reasons. Before 2001, most countries dealt with extremism and terrorism as a police matter within the framework of national laws and human rights. Since then, with the coined term ‘war on terror,’ the response to violent extremism and acts of terror has been primarily through the use of force. There have been many national and international efforts under the rubric of ‘counter-terrorism’ to deal with these issues. In many countries, counter-terrorism legislation as well as newfound practices of security forces deeply compromise human rights standards and norms of international humanitarian law. Counter-terrorism as a framework lies somewhere in the middle, between a police operation and a war fully governed by international humanitarian law. The ambiguous positioning along with new, unregulated technologies and practices of warfare have created increasing dilemmas for both women’s rights and human rights activists and mechanisms. In addition, the concept of counter-terrorism is not static but is constantly evolving to include more actors and more aspects of a community’s life. One cannot question the fact that many countries face difficult security choices, but conceptual clarity with regard to what they hope to do and what limits should be placed on certain strategies, must be the first step in moving forward.

Increasing recognition of women’s participation and empowerment should not be part of counter-terrorism strategies but a part of the civilian peace agenda

Recent research from many think tanks, highlighted in the journal *Foreign Policy*,³⁶ has increasingly shown that there is a correlation between women’s rights and a decrease in violent extremism. Those countries with relative gender equality are less prone to violent extremism. The revelation of this research data has resulted in a great deal of debate and discussion. Many advocates have different approaches on how to instrumentalize the finding, leading to sharp division among policy makers and practitioners alike.


The first school of thought put forward by many security think tanks is to include the issue of women and women's equality in military planning. It urges field level military officers to engage and befriend women, empower them and to train them to be watchful so as to use them as intelligence. This is a dangerous, shortsighted use of this research. It puts women at risk, alienates them from their communities as well as their families. Though it may produce results in the short-term, in the long-term it will destroy the social fabric of the society that is being rebuilt.

The second approach is the nation building approach which aims at a comprehensive policy, where many strategies, including development, human rights and women's rights, are included in a top down model imposed from above and which essentially supplements a military or securitized counter-terrorism strategy. This second approach is currently dominant in the discourse of the United Nations and OECD countries. The Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy of the United Nations adopted by consensus in September 2006, and its review resolutions,³⁷ provide the strategic framework and policy guidance to the collective effort of the UN system on countering terrorism. The Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy characterizes terrorism as "one of the most serious threats to international peace and security" and contains four pillars: (I) tackling the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism; (II) preventing and combating terrorism; (III) building States' capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and to strengthen the

role of the UN system in that respect; and (IV) ensuring respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the fundamental basis for the fight against terrorism.³⁸ The peace and security dimensions of counter-terrorism are particularly understood as being expressed in pillars I and IV.³⁹

While the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy does not include a specific reference to gender, the resolution adopted at its fourth biennial review in June 2014 encourages Member States, UN entities as well as international and regional organizations to "consider the participation of women in efforts to prevent and counter terrorism."⁴⁰ The Secretary-General's 2014 report on Activities of the UN system in implementing the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy notes that women can play a significant role in preventing extremist violence and building resilience against it.⁴¹

The UN human rights system has increasingly addressed the issue of gender and terrorism. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations recommended that State Parties, "reject all forms of rollbacks in women's rights protections in order to appease non-State actors such as terrorists, private individuals or armed groups."⁴² The Human Rights Council requests the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism to, inter alia, "integrate a gender perspective throughout the work of his/her mandate,"⁴³ and the 2009 report to the General Assembly by the Special Rapporteur calls on Governments to remedy the gender inequality that makes women the targets of terrorism, and ensure that victims of terrorism receive support, including by repealing discriminatory barriers (e.g., unequal inheritance laws) that frustrate assistance.⁴⁴ The General Assembly resolutions on the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism have called on Member States "to shape, review and implement all counter-terrorism measures in accordance with the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination."⁴⁵

 *The Secretary General's 2015 report on conflict-related sexual violence highlights its use as integrally linked with the strategic objectives, ideology and funding of extremist groups.*

The Security Council has increasingly referred to women in its resolutions and statements related to terrorism. Resolution 2178 adopted in September 2014 focuses on the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters and recognizes for the first time the need to empower women as a mitigating factor to the spread of violent extremism and radicalization.⁴⁶ It is also the first time in a Chapter VII resolution that efforts to counter violent extremism, including preventing radicalization and recruitment, are deemed an ‘essential element’⁴⁷ in addressing the threat posed by foreign fighters. This is emblematic of the shift seen over the past year in particular, in the UN’s approach to this issue.

This paradigm shift within the UN system and in Europe remains deeply problematic and goes against everything women actually living in local communities are saying. While empowering women as a bulwark against extremism is an important idea, such empowerment should never be part of Chapter VII of the Charter on the use of force. It should not come within the ambit of counter-terrorism, but as part of the civilian assistance to the development and human rights programmes in

the country. To enmesh such programmes in counter-terrorism strategies, sanctioned by the Security Council, is to deeply compromise the role of women’s organizations and women leaders associated with the programmes. There has to be a shift towards recognition that countering terrorism should be limited in scope and where broad-based strategies for countering and preventing violent extremism are concerned, the development and human rights agencies should take the lead. The Secretary-General is currently developing a Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism that he will present to the 70th General Assembly in November this year. It is hoped that the Plan will consider these words of caution.

Countering violent extremism and the women, peace and security agenda

As the previous paragraphs point out, in countering violent extremism, the international community is moving toward a nation building approach which includes human rights and women’s rights as part of a counter-

FOCUS ON

Utilizing the role of mothers in preventing violent extremism

Noting that mothers are often in a unique position to identify early signs of violent behavior and intervene, a number of initiatives focusing on the roles of mothers have been established in countries including India, Ireland, Nigeria, Pakistan and Yemen. These include Mothers MOVE! (Mothers Opposed to Violent Extremism) and Mothers Schools.

Through Mothers Schools, the organization SAVE provides training and materials for local partners to run home-based workshops with mothers in communities-at-risk for a period of six months.⁴⁹ These provide


a space for mothers to discuss common issues, particularly regarding violent extremism. However, there is a risk for Mothers Schools to promote a stereotypical view of women’s roles in society. It is therefore important that any support to Mothers Schools includes an empowerment component, for example access to income-generating skills or education opportunities for mothers, or their daughters, participating in the programme. Building the capacity of mothers as well as families to detect early warning signs of violence, and intervene emotionally and intellectually, must be supported.⁵⁰

terrorism approach. Many Member States and women's organizations in western capitals strongly support the nation building approach outlined above since it allows for more holistic governance without reliance on purely military means, though it still remains within a military ambit. However, it is ironic that such policies, as well as the groups supporting them, do not recognize the internal contradiction; that human rights and women's rights are also elements of "checks and balances" within a governance system. To include them as counter-terrorism efforts is to deeply compromise their value in any given society.

Consultations in Africa and Asia made it clear that women's organizations in those continents, where these strategies actually play out, were deeply skeptical of including such programmes within the rubric of counter-terrorism, especially if such strategies implied a top-down nation building approach emanating from a global strategy which essentially supplements a military process. Such strategies, initially designed for Iraq and Afghanistan, have not been a total success and cannot really move forward without acknowledging the variation that exists among regions and communities.

The alternative that was suggested, and which this Study endorses fully, is to remove women's rights and even human rights interventions from military responses and counter-terrorism efforts. Their place in these efforts deeply compromises the practitioners. Instead it is important to have a distinct civilian process, that may require the military to provide security but which is fully detached from the military, that places emphasis on respecting the autonomy of local women peacebuilders and civil society organizations. These groups should take the lead and it is important to work with them in partnership to design programmes for combatting violent extremism outside the framework of counter-terrorism or any military process. Some successful examples do exist and such programmes designed by locals, assisted by international actors, are more likely to have resonance in the community without instrumentalizing and securitizing women's rights.

One such programme is the training of women religious leaders to work as mentors in their communities. For

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example, in 2005 Morocco's Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs began certifying female preachers (imams), known as mourchidates. They are charged with promoting religious moderation and tolerance with the objective of curbing violent extremism. As of 2014, there are more than 500 mourchidates working in mosques, communities, and prisons with women and youths in Rabat and Casablanca. The mourchidate initiative has been hailed as a success within and beyond Morocco.⁴⁸

Another area is the use of alternative media that presents a different narrative. Violent extremists have made effective use of social media platforms to advance their aims, whether through engagement, propaganda, radicalization or recruitment. In the same way, media channels can be used to counter the narratives of violent extremists and develop messages on gender equality, good governance, and conflict prevention as it relates to countering violent extremism. One example is Sawa Shabab, a radio series airing weekly in South Sudan based on an educational, peacebuilding curriculum designed and produced with local partners. Sawa Shabab follows the daily lives of different young South Sudanese as they face unique challenges while learning how to become peacebuilders in their communities. The underlying curriculum includes a strong focus on countering stereotypes, respecting diversity and promoting gender equality. After listening to the show, young female participants indicated that 'being educated' is an important quality for young women and awareness among male participants about gender equality had notably increased.⁵¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

Moving progress beyond 2015: Proposals for action

Member States, the UN and regional organizations should:

- ✓ Detach programming on women's rights from counter-terrorism and extremism, and all military planning and military processes. Any effort at empowering them should be through civilian assistance to the women themselves or to development and human rights agencies.
- ✓ Protect women's and girls' rights at all times and ensure that efforts to counter violent extremism strategies do not stereotype, instrumentalize or securitize women and girls.
- ✓ Work with local women and institutions to engage women at all levels, and allow local women autonomy and leadership in determining their priorities and strategies in countering extremism.
- ✓ Invest in research and data collection on women's roles in terrorism including identifying the drivers that lead to their radicalization and involvement with terrorist groups, and the impacts of counter-terrorism strategies on their lives. This should include the impact of counter-terrorism laws and regulations on the operation of women's civil society organizations, and their access to resources to undertake activities relating to countering violent extremism.
- ✓ Ensure gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation of all counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism interventions. This should specifically address the impact on women and girls, including through use of gender-related indicators and collection of sex-disaggregated data.

Member States, the UN, regional organizations and civil society should:

- ✓ Build the capacity of women and girls, including mothers, female community and religious leaders, and women's civil society groups to engage in efforts to counter violent extremism in a manner tailored to local contexts. This can include the provision of specialized training, facilitating, training of women religious leaders to work as mentors in their communities, increasing women's access to secular and religious education to amplify their voices against extremist narratives and supporting mother's schools. All this capacity building should again be through civilian agencies and with women peacebuilders deciding the priorities and the content of their programmes.
- ✓ Develop gender-sensitive disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes that address the specific needs of women and girls. Draw upon the lessons learned from disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) initiatives under the women, peace and security agenda.

Member States and the UN should:

The UN should:

- ✓ Ensure accountability mechanisms and processes mandated to prevent and respond to extremist violence have the necessary gender expertise to fulfill their mandates.

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