

The Lived Experiences of Women Leaders at the University of Dar es Salaam and the State University of Zanzibar

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Abstract

This paper explores the lived leadership experiences of women leaders at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) and the State University of Zanzibar (SUZA). The study employed the phenomenology research design, and involved a total of 31 participants. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and documentary review. The study findings revealed that, to become a leader, there are obstacles such as loopholes in university policies, guidelines and leadership, university charters, as well as stated leadership attributes. It was also revealed that leadership capacity-building, self-efficacy and self-esteem and accountability were the strategies used by women to remain in university leadership positions. This paper concludes that women leaders pass through a labyrinth to become and remain leaders. The study recommends that university managements should facilitate the provision of leadership capacity-building, supported by favourable policy environments to enhance the nurturing of women leaders.

Keywords: *leadership, women leaders, University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), State University of Zanzibar (SUZA)*

1. Introduction/ Literature Review

Historically, leadership in public universities has tended to be male-dominated, indicating that women need to demonstrate high leadership capabilities to compete with men in leadership posts (Lipton, 2017). Thus, experiences pertaining to career advancement, promotion and leadership between men and women in higher education institutions differ substantially. Traditionally, men leaders in universities were primarily responsible for the construction of contemporary leadership organisational structures, culture, institutional guidelines, regulations and policies (Acker, 2014).

For several decades, women in higher education institutions were left out of leadership positions, thereby prompting worldwide debates about why they were left out (Gandhi & Sen, 2020). Recently, the number of female recruited as academicians, and their proportion in academic promotions, has been increasing; but few of them persist in senior and middle leadership positions (O'Connor,

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2019). Most institutions—including higher education institutions worldwide—have initiated and implemented the directives stipulated by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations, 1979). The General Assembly of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPFA) aimed to fight against discrimination of women in the social, economic and political spheres of life (United Nations, 1995). Furthermore, the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed to achieving equality and equity of human being in all spheres of life by all nations around the world, including leadership positions (United Nations, 2017).

The global context existing data indicate that there is a considerable women leader discrepancy in various university leadership positions. For instance, women leaders in universities in China constitute only 4.5 percent of the total population (Zhao & Jones, 2017). Although recently there was a relative increase in number and in terms of percentages of female academics who were vice chancellors in European universities, the situation was different at the level of individual European countries because some countries experienced drop-outs of female academic leaders—especially in vice-chancellor’s positions—in their universities. For example, female leaders in Iceland dropped from 40% to 30%, Sweden from 50% to 41.7%, Norway from 41.3% to 31.3%, and in Denmark from 32.7% to 26.8% (European Commission, 2019).

In the African context, the protocols enshrined in the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR) and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) that aimed to ensure the rights for women participation in decision-making and elimination of gender inequalities were ratified. The underlined motive for the ratification was to promote gender equality and equity. In Tanzania, the constitution emphasizes gender equality and advocates equal opportunities for both men and women to participate in leadership activities (URT, 1998). The National Women and Gender Development Policy was launched in 2000, and was intended to campaign for national gender equality and equity matters, including leadership. However, despite these initiatives at the international and national levels for gender equality and equity in social, political and economic spheres, little substantive changes have occurred in this perspective in most universities around the world. Studies on higher education suggest that senior leadership positions in most higher education institutions are still held by males (Shepherd, 2017).

Morley (2014) notes that it is doubtful if women academics desire or are disqualified to contest for top-most leadership positions like chancellors or vice chancellors in universities. A similar argument is raised by Ceci and Williams (2011) who posit that women are less prioritised in career advancement, so they fail to meet academic merits that are basic for someone to be appointed for leadership positions. Additionally, the individualistic nature of career progression and academic promotions, especially in top academic ranks, hinder women from

becoming leaders in higher education institutions since they lack self-motivation and esteem resulting from multiple responsibilities as women, including family matters and career responsibilities (Howson, Coate & de St Croix, 2018).

According to Mulya and Sakhiyya (2020), the meritocratic leadership discourse in universities obstructs women from attaining leadership positions. The essence of meritocracy in universities is based on excellence, hardworking, commitment and talented person in teaching, research production and consultancy regardless of other non-merit factors, such as gender (Owens & de St Croix, 2020).

Although leadership positions seem to be a good fortune for employees in many organisations, Acker (2014) notes that there are some women who dislike leadership roles despite the fact that they possess appropriate qualifications for them to be appointed or voted as leaders. Similarly, Sen (2020) observed that some women in universities are not willing to be leaders, especially in senior leadership positions. Although some women who are leaders in Tanzania universities have outstanding leadership performances despite many responsibilities and social hitches, there has been limited research to capture their experiences regarding how they managed to become and remain leaders. It is, therefore, against this background that this study was rationalised. The key argument of the paper is to explore leadership experiences encountered by women at the UDSM and SUZA, focusing on how they managed to become and remain leaders. It is envisaged that the study findings will be of profound significance to women who are aspiring to become leaders, or those already in leadership positions, in Tanzania public universities.

1.1 Women and Leadership in Universities

Across the globe, managing universities requires competent and capable leaders who can utilise available resources effectively and efficiently. Read and Kehm (2016) proclaimed that in 2013, only 17 percent of the positions of vice chancellor in universities in the United Kingdom and 12 percent in Germany were held by women. Furthermore, Kele and Pietersen (2015) argued that there are disproportionate and discrepancies of women leaders in South African higher education institutions relative to male counterparts. Morley (2014) reported the same scenario regarding women vice chancellors in Hong Kong, Kuwait, Japan and Turkey universities; with statistics further indicating that Hong Kong had no women vice chancellors. In the same vein, universities in Kuwait had only 2%, Japan had 2.3% and Turkey had 8.7% as women leadership. [Similarly, other studies such as by Gandhi and Sen \(2020\), have indicated male dominance in the position of vice chancellor in public central universities, public state universities and private universities in India.](#) In practice, leadership positions – especially top executive management posts in many higher education institutions around the world – seem to be male-dominated, thereby limiting women’s voices in decision-making organs (Nyoni & He, 2019).

Traditionally, there has been a slow and steady improvement of women’s access to middle and senior leadership positions in higher education institutions despite several initiatives taken, like the development and implementation of leadership succession planning for them to pursue leadership roles (Reis & Grady, 2019). The gender gap in Tanzania higher education institutions leadership positions are evidenced by individual university statistical data of 2019 (SUA, UDOM, UDSM, MU and SUZA university websites) as indicated Figure 1.

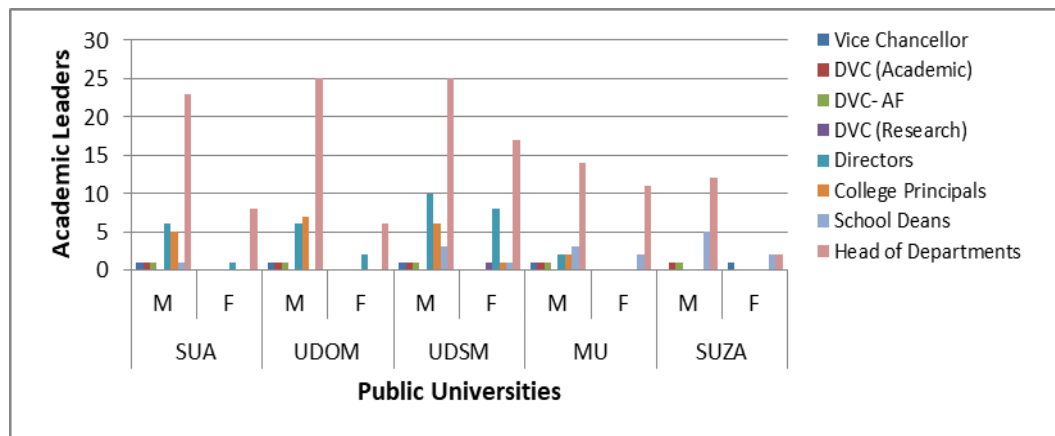


Figure 1: University Leadership Positions by Gender at SUA, UDOM, UDSM, MU and SUZA in 2019

Source: SUZA, SUA, UDOM, UDSM and MU University websites

Figure 1 shows that men in leadership positions outnumber women. It is also observed that most women fall in the lower ranks of university leadership (head of departments) than other top leadership positions such as vice chancellors and deputy vice chancellors. Although the gender gap is observed in many leadership positions, the UDSM appears to be doing better as compared to other public universities. Lastly, it can be observed in Figure 1 that only two of the top-most university leadership positions were held by women: one at the UDSM (DVC - Research), and the other at SUZA (Vice-Chancellor).

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The present study was informed by the liberal feminist theory and the social justice theory. The liberal feminist theory, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, influenced change in the perception of women’s minds from being regarded as the objects for domestic chores like child-rearing and housework responsibilities, to consideration of their achievements and capabilities in other fields outside the home environment (Lorber, 2001). The major assumptions of the liberal feminist theory were equality of opportunity

and same rights across gender. Based on this theoretical insight, biological differences should be ignored to achieve gender equality (Nyoni & He, 2019). Moreover, the theory emphasizes women empowerment in leadership so that their voices can be heard in various decision-making organs, and in the fight against any kind of exploitation and discrimination from socio-cultural biases (Lorber, 2001). The theory emphasises equal opportunities based on individual capabilities, qualifications and talents (Mbepera, 2015). The liberal feminist theory informs this study because it emphasise the primacy of equal access to leadership in public universities irrespective of gender.

On the other hand, the social justice theory was propounded by John Rawls, a political scientist, in 1971. His theory was embedded in the vision of claims by liberalism that individuals were entitled to fairness in the access to public goods, resources and opportunities like leadership or power in a way that they respect other people's rights in societies (Turhan, 2010). Another scholar who contributed to the social justice debates and discourses was Fraser (1997), who identified the three major assumptions of social justice theory, namely: recognition, redistribution, and participatory justice. Fraser (*ibid.*) advanced that women desire to act in a way that recognises positive existence and claims. In this respect, the major issues here are accessibility to resources and the principle that govern how public goods are distributed or allocated within a society (Fraser, 1997; Bosu et al., 2011; Tickly & Dachi, 2009). Furthermore, the theory emphasised participation that is based on equal opportunities for all individuals and groups within a society (Fraser, 1997; Tickly & Dachi, 2009). These three dimensions of social justice discourse were focused on the principles of equality, equity, rights and participation of individuals or groups in a societies regardless of gender, race, age, ethnicity or religious backgrounds.

The social justice discourse was considered important to inform this study because it advocates the respect of the rights of all human beings and dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction.

In Tanzania, leadership in public universities is achieved through academic merits. Therefore, public universities are presented as meritocratic institutions that purport to operate as gender neutral, particularly in the appointment and selection of university academic leaders. Public universities seem to practice the objective criteria for obtaining leaders to occupy vacancies in various positions. Thus, the meritocratic principle and its attributes are backed by policy, guidelines, legal and institutional frameworks. However, it is still debatable on how women in Tanzania public universities become and remain leaders. Existing studies (see, e.g., Morley, 2014; Moodly & Toni, 2017; Sakhiyya & Locke, 2019) claim that the application of meritocracy in university leadership limits women in the recruitment process, academic promotion and excelling to the middle and senior leadership positions. Although some women hold important leadership positions, there is a limited

research that captures their experiences. It is this vacuum that prompted this study to explore leadership experiences of women leaders, particularly in their process of becoming and remaining women leader, at the UDSM and the SUZA.

2. Methodology of the Study

The study employed a qualitative research approach informed by the phenomenological research design. The phenomenological research design was justified by the need for understanding the context of the 'lived experiences' of women leaders and university top executive officers, and the information that they hold regarding leadership experiences of women leaders at the UDSM and SUZA to generate meaning and interpretations carried by their experiences.

2.1 Description of Research Sites

The study was conducted in two Tanzanian public universities: SUZA and UDSM. The universities were selected by using purposeful sampling technique. The UDSM was purposefully selected because it had a large number of female academics appointed to various university leadership positions (UDSM, 2019). Similarly, the SUZA was selected because it had a small number of female academics appointed to various university leadership positions (SUZA, 2018).

2.2 Description of the Study Participants

Three categories of study participants in this study were recruited through purposive sampling technique and snowballing sampling technique. The research employed the purposive criterion sampling technique to select participants based on two criteria: first, women leaders who were continuing leaders and had served more than one year in academic leadership; and second, former women leaders who had academic leadership experiences and had served more than two years in academic leadership. In addition to the purposive criterion sampling technique, the research also employed the snowballing sampling technique to enable the researcher to access knowledgeable and experienced research participants who would be significant to the study, but of whom the researcher was not aware. After each interview session, the researcher requested the concerned research participants to suggest other possible participants who could be approached for interviews, and who—in their opinions—may be able to provide information useful to the study. Furthermore, university top executive officers were purposively included in the sample for the aim of data triangulation so as to make the study credible. University top executive officers were deemed fit in the study because they all play a critical role in implementing university policies. Subsequently, the research successfully recruited 31 participants, namely: 11 continuing women leaders, 10 former university women leaders who served in middle and senior leadership positions, and 10 university top executive officers.

2.3 Data Collection Method

This study employed semi-structured interviews to obtain participants' narratives about their leadership experiences and views regarding women university leaders. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 31 study participants whereby the interview session lasted for 45 to 90 minutes. Moreover, a documentary review method was used to collect data for triangulation purpose. These documents were obtained from the university management officials who are the custodian of university documents, such as directors of gender, university legal officers, directors of planning and directors of human resource. Furthermore, documents were obtained from university libraries and websites, and the TCU website. Such documents were reviewed because they contained information about academic leadership at the universities. Document reviewed included corporate strategic plans, speeches, university charters, university acts, guidelines for the appointment of leaders in academic units, and the gender policies of the universities.

The researcher employed multiple data collection methods to ensure credibility, confirmability, transferability and dependability of the study findings. The study also adhered to research ethics such as obtaining a research permit, considered participant willingness to participate in the study, signed informed consent, as well as respect for anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and research sites through the use of general names and alphabetical letters to represent the universities. The UDSM was assigned letter *Q*, and the SUZA was assigned letter *P*.

2.4 Data Analysis

The six stages of interpretive data analysis (IPA) were adopted from Moustakas (1994) to analyse data collected through the semi-structured interview method. In the first stage, the researcher begun analysis by reading and re-reading both printed and non-printed or electronic documents, data from field notes, and listening repeatedly to audiotapes of recorded data from interviews to capture verbatim and non-verbal cues for transcription purposes. All interviews were audio-recorded, uploaded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Once transcription was completed, the researcher employed the member check strategy to strengthen the credibility of the data. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher returned the transcripts to participants to review them and see if they had reflected the conversations, i.e., the researcher requested the study participants to validate the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data. Lastly, the produced transcribed data was protected by the researcher by passwords and encryption of the document to limit its accessibility to other people.

The second stage of the IPA involved the generation of [initial results](#) whereby the researcher examined the semantic content and language used by research participants to capture the unique ways by which research participants' talks, understand and think about the phenomenon under study. In the third stage,

the researcher developed emergent themes. At this stage the researcher commenced by identifying and recognising similar themes that emerged during the second stage of the initial noting. In the fourth stage, the researcher searched for connections across emergent theme, and clustered emergent themes together to form sub-themes that were then compiled into super-ordinate themes. The fifth stage involved the researcher moving to the next transcript and repeating all the stages mentioned above for each. Finally, the researcher looked for patterns across the different tables of themes to recognise and respect the participants' convergences and divergences in the data. Similarly, the relevant documents were reviewed through documentary review methods to validate authenticity and utilise the data. The documents were critically examined and analysed using the content analysis technique (Cohen et al., 2018).

3. Results and Discussion

As mentioned earlier, the study aimed to examine how women academics become and remain leaders at the UDSM and SUZA. Below are the findings of the study.

3.1 Women Become Leaders

The analysis of data from documentary review and interviews revealed that it was difficult for women at the UDSM and SUZA to become leaders because of weaknesses found in the attributes stipulated in the guidelines and procedures for the appointment of academic leaders, and policy statements emanating from the universities' charters and strategic plans.

One evidence of an unclear policy statement regarding women leaders is given by one study participant from **University Q**, who narrated that:

"The charter is silent. It does not talk about gender; it does not tell us which specific leadership positions have to be gendered. These policies may indicate that at least one-third of the membership in leadership should be female as it was written in the charter, but what happened in the ground is something different."

Furthermore, the above claims were similar to those from documentary review from **University P** as can be seen from the following quotation:

"However, the current university management is male-dominated: about ninety percent of members in the management organs are male. Also, there is no direct representation of departments or units which are under the Vice Chancellor, and some Deputy Vice Chancellor administration in the Dean and Director committees."

This implies that the university charters and institutional policies of both **University Q** and **P** need to be revisited and reversed to amend its contradictions, so as to set clear institutional policy statements and strategies regarding the inclusion and participation of women in university leadership; and likewise to meet the current global needs of gender equity, equality and inclusiveness of all sex, especially female participation in leadership.

These findings concur with the liberal feminist discourse which asserts that biological differences between males and females need to be ignored to remove sex oppression and achieve gender equality and equity in all social, economic and political spheres of life among individuals in the society. Similarly, these findings are in line with the reviewed document of the revised UDSM gender policy of 2021, which – as among one of its strategies for university governance and decision-making – affirmed to “... institute affirmative action measures to enforce the provision on one-third female enrolment (as is provided in the UDSM Charter) at all levels of decision making including top level at UDSM” (UDSM 2021: 9). However, the UDSM’s guidelines and procedures for appointment of university academic leaders emphasises the rejection of affirmative action to increase access and participation of women in leadership. It is documented that the “... criteria and standards of appointment should not be lowered or changed to favour any group. History indicates that efforts have been made in the past to appoint deserving females” (UDSM, 2006: 5). Furthermore, affirmative action measures stated by UDSM’s revised gender policy of 2021 contradicts the UDSM Charter of 2007, which states:

“... no test of religion, race, ethnicity, sex, physical condition, ideology or political belief orientation or other similar criteria shall be imposed upon any person in order to entitle him or her to be admitted to the university or hold any office therein (UDSM Charter, 2007: 19–20).

However, the finding is not in line with the social justice discourse which emphasise participation of all people in matters concerning leadership regardless of gender, ethnicity or religious affiliation to create a fair and just society. This is supported by McNae and Vali (2015) who argued that unclear university leadership appointment procedures and practices, gate keeping and ‘queen bees’ as crucial areas that influence women’s access and participation in university leadership positions.

Therefore, one can conclude that university management who are mandated to take control over the whole process of appointing university leaders in all academic units have the obligation to rethink and modify search guidelines and procedures for the appointment of the university leaders. It is recommended that the managements of **University P** and **Q** should rethink of amending their university charters and Acts to align with the global agenda of gender equity by appointing special committees that will be assigned such tasks as conducting need assessment and questionnaire to capture stakeholders’ views and their contributions with regard to new guidelines for the appointment of university leaders in all academic units.

3.2 Remaining Women Leaders

When asked on how they were able to remain in leadership either by being appointed in the same position or new post(s) for a second triennium (undergo vertical or horizontal leadership progression), the majority of the interviewed

women leaders revealed that they managed to secure such posts using different strategies: leadership capacity-building, developing self-efficacy and self-esteem, and accountability.

3.2.1 Leadership Capacity-building

It was found that some women leaders had received leadership capacity-building that helped them succeed and remain in leadership progression. They reported that the trainings assisted them to run day-to-day office duties, provided by both **Universities P** and **Q**. These trainings acted as an important source of knowledge and skills related to specific job or leadership position. They also provided an understanding of the organisation structure and how it operates. One of the participants from **University Q** explained how she and the university benefited from the leadership capacity-building sponsored by her university. She narrated:

"I have gone through a leadership capacity-building course offered by the International Women Forum (IWF) outside our country, and I was sponsored by my university. I am lucky, I also did leadership training on public procurement regulations and I have a knowledge of national procurement regulations and financial management which was sponsored by the World Bank project via my institution. I was able to have all these stuffs because I was given that opportunity by my university."

Another participant from **University P** acknowledged that the leadership capacity-building she received from her university exposed her to the world of leadership:

"I learned much from the training I attended on leadership capacity-building. As a leader, one has to carefully read and know the office functions. One should be open to learn, ask from others, work on the information and make decisions, and sometimes ask questions from experienced people before making the final decision(s)."

The findings further indicated that, leadership capacity-building is important for building strong, efficient and effective women leaders who understand managerial practices, and who are well-equipped with leadership skills for managing organisations. This finding is in line with previous studies which indicate that leadership capacity-building is significantly an important aspect in higher education institutions, and it should not be ignored when grooming women leaders. Awang-Hashim et al., (2017) argue that leadership development programmes conducted by higher education institutions are more important for preparing and supporting women to be promoted to top managerial positions.

A study by Asmamaw (2017) insisted that universities should invest on the provision of special leadership training programs such as seminars and workshops to women leaders. This is important to equip them with appropriate leadership knowledge and skills. This is also supported by Kele and Pietersen (2015) who argue that leadership capacity-building plays a positive role in

shaping women and making them fit into various leadership positions in higher education institution. These observations, therefore, concurs with the study's findings that leadership capacity-building is an important aspect for women to progress in leadership.

3.2.2 *Accountability*

This was another aspect reported by women leaders in both universities. It was found that women were accountable for their leadership roles to their colleagues, students and other stakeholders in their respective schools, colleges, directorates and universities. They reported that women leaders had to show a sense of responsiveness, be answerable to whatever question arose, and be transparent. A participant from **University Q** said:

"It is my responsibility to provide service to everybody who comes to my office. It is my responsibility to explain, and provide answers on everything that clients need from my office. It is my responsibility to offer services to him or her: I mean customer care. It is my responsibility to foresee if things are going well as they are supposed to be, especially things which are related to my people, and if there are challenges to share with other authorities."

Indeed, the findings indicated that women leaders were accountable, transparent, answerable and responsive to their leadership roles assigned by their respective higher education institutions. This finding is supported by Hannum et al. (2015) who asserted that women leaders need to be accountable for everything in the institutions they are working. Mahapatra and Gupta (2013) also argued that women leaders in higher educational management must demonstrate honesty, transparency and accountability to motivate their colleagues at work. However, this finding is contrary to that of Lerra and Oume (2017) who commented that top management leaders from public universities were not accountable or transparent to their university communities. Thus, one can conclude that accountability is a pivotal pillar for leaders, and thus enhances the opportunities of women academics to remain in leadership positions. This implies that university management should formulate policies that enforce accountability for university leaders.

3.2.3 *Self-efficacy and Self-esteem*

The study indicated that women leaders make use of self-efficacy and self-esteem to become leaders in higher institutions of learning. This also made them remain in leadership positions in their respective universities and colleges. One participants from **University Q** narrated:

"I believe in productivity, prayers and professionalism. I make sure that whatever I am doing, I put them in prayers. I make sure that I am a professional in the sense that I do not oppress or favour anybody."

Similarly, another participant from **University P** reported:

"I always pray most to God. I never let down myself, I am honest to myself and if I make a mistake, I accept and make another step to change. I am a very committed person, a hard worker, and a result-oriented person."

The two narrations above imply that women leaders use self-efficacy and self-esteem in leading their colleagues. This finding concurs with the findings by Coetzee and Moosa (2020), who argue that confidence and self-efficacy play a fundamental role in making women leaders build trust to their subordinates. Additionally, Ekine (2018) commented that positive self-esteem assisted women leaders to remain in their leadership positions. It can be concluded that women leaders employ their own beliefs/self-efficacy and self-esteem to perform their duties, and thus facilitate them to remain in leadership.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings from the women leaders regarding their lived leadership experiences at the University of Dar es salaam and the State University of Zanzibar, we can conclude that women leaders pass through difficult paths, or labyrinths, to become and remain leaders—unlike their male counterparts who have straight routes—to achieve various university leadership positions. Moreover, their leadership paths are full of obstacles that they need to overcome to climb the desired leadership ladder. Therefore, it is recommended that leadership capacity-buildings, supported by favourable policy environments, are essential build blocks for increasing participation of women in university leadership.

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