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Review Article

Invisible Shackles: Understanding the Wife-as-Maid Syndrome Through Feminist and Sociocultural Lenses

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ABSTRACT

In many patriarchal societies, marriage continues to serve as a space where gendered expectations reinforce women's roles as unpaid domestic laborers. This paper offers a theoretical exploration of the phenomenon often described by women as being treated "like a maid" within their own homes. Drawing from feminist theory, Marxist critiques of unpaid labor, and sociocultural norms in the Indian context, this paper examines how emotional and physical labor performed by wives is normalized, invisible, and rarely reciprocated. The discussion highlights the psychological toll of such roles, the normalization of inequality, and the need to reconceptualize marriage as a partnership rather than a hierarchy. This work contributes to the growing body of literature that critiques the romanticization of traditional marriage and calls for a deeper interrogation of domestic power dynamics.

Keywords: Domestic labor, Feminist theory, Gender roles, Marriage, Patriarchy, Unpaid work

INTRODUCTION

The institution of marriage, while romanticized as a union of equals, often perpetuates deeply entrenched gender hierarchies that position women as primary caregivers and domestic laborers within the household. This phenomenon, which we term the "Wife-as-Maid Syndrome," represents a complex interplay of sociocultural expectations, economic dependencies, and psychological conditioning that reduces married women to the status of unpaid domestic workers within their own homes.^[1] The syndrome manifests when wives find themselves shouldering disproportionate domestic responsibilities while their contributions remain invisible, unacknowledged, and unrecompensed.

This theoretical exploration seeks to understand how patriarchal structures embedded within marriage creates conditions where women's labor is systematically devalued and normalized. By examining this phenomenon through feminist and sociocultural lenses, we aim to illuminate the mechanisms that perpetuate domestic inequality and challenge the romanticized narratives surrounding traditional marriage roles.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to reframe discussions about domestic labor from individual relationship dynamics to broader systemic issues rooted in gender inequality. By understanding marriage as a site of labor exploitation rather than merely personal fulfilment [Figure 1], we can begin to address the structural changes necessary for creating truly equitable partnerships.

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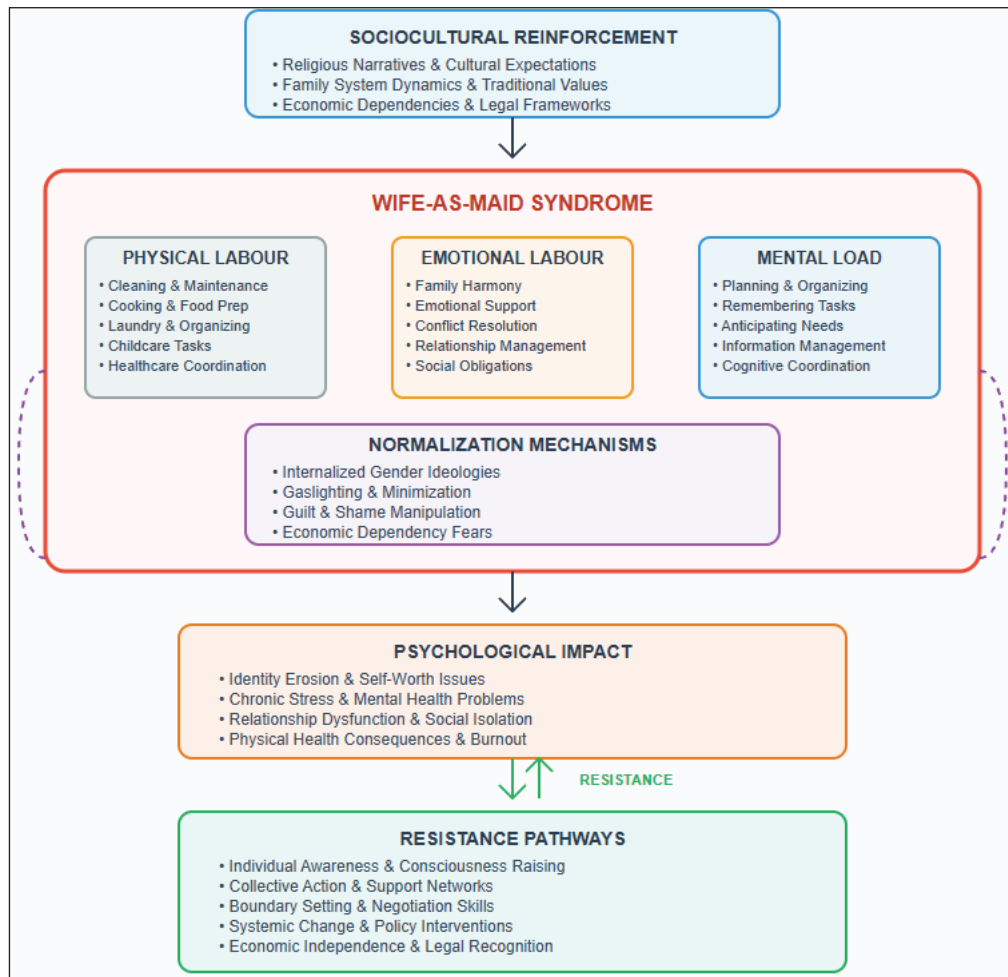


Figure 1: The invisible shackles framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist perspectives on domestic labor

Feminist scholars have long recognized domestic work as a critical site of gender oppression. Silvia Federici's groundbreaking work on the "wages for housework" movement highlighted how women's unpaid domestic labor subsidizes capitalist production by maintaining and reproducing the workforce.^[2] This perspective challenges the notion that housework is a "natural" female responsibility, instead positioning it as economically valuable work that has been systematically devalued through gendered ideologies.

Betty Friedan's concept of the "feminine mystique" identified how post-war societies created elaborate justifications for confining women to domestic roles, presenting housework and childcare as sources of feminine fulfilment rather than labor.^[3] This mystification process obscures the actual work involved in maintaining households and caring for family members, making it difficult for women to recognize or articulate their exploitation.

Contemporary feminist economist Marilyn Waring's analysis of unpaid work within national accounting systems demonstrates how women's domestic contributions are systematically excluded from economic calculations, rendering their labor invisible at both household and national levels.^[4] This invisibility creates a vicious cycle where unpaid work remains undervalued because it is unmeasured, and remains unmeasured because it is undervalued.

Marxist analysis of unpaid labor

Marxist feminist theory provides crucial insights into how domestic labor functions within capitalist systems. Margaret Benston's analysis of housework as part of the "reproduction of labor power" demonstrates how women's unpaid work serves capitalist interests by maintaining workers at no cost to employers.^[5] This perspective reveals how the apparent privacy of domestic arrangements serve broader economic functions.

The concept of "social reproduction," developed by scholars like Lise Vogel and Johanna Brenner, illuminates how domestic

labor creates and maintains the conditions necessary for capitalist production.^[6] Women's work in feeding, cleaning, nurturing, and emotionally supporting family members ensures that workers can return to productive labor each day, yet this essential function remains economically invisible.

Engels' analysis of the family as an economic unit reveals how marriage functions as a mechanism for controlling women's labor and sexuality within capitalist societies.^[7] His observation that women's economic dependence within marriage creates conditions analogous to prostitution remains relevant for understanding how domestic labor arrangements can become exploitative.

Sociocultural dimensions in the Indian context

Indian sociocultural norms surrounding marriage and women's roles provide a particularly rich context for examining the wife-as-maid phenomenon. Traditional concepts like "*pativrata*" (devotion to husband) and "*grahini*" (homemaker) create powerful ideological frameworks that justify women's subordination within marriage.^[8] These cultural narratives present domestic service as a spiritual duty rather than labor, making it difficult for women to recognize or resist exploitation.

The joint family system, while often celebrated as a source of social support, frequently intensifies women's domestic burdens by expanding the scope of their responsibilities to include extended family members.^[9] Daughters-in-law, in particular, face expectations to serve not only their husbands but entire households, with their worth measured by their willingness to perform domestic labor uncomplainingly.

Caste and class dynamics further complicate these arrangements, as upper-caste and upper-class women may employ domestic workers while still shouldering primary responsibility for household management and emotional labor.^[10] This creates hierarchical systems where some women's labor is monetized while others' remains invisible, but all remain ultimately responsible for domestic spheres.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptualizing the wife-as-maid syndrome

The wife-as-maid syndrome represents a systematic reduction of married women to the status of unpaid domestic workers within their own homes. This phenomenon encompasses several interconnected dimensions that distinguish it from normal household labor sharing. Unlike equitable domestic arrangements, the syndrome involves complete responsibility asymmetry, where women bear primary or exclusive responsibility for household tasks regardless of their employment status or other commitments.

The syndrome manifests through emotional labor demands that extend far beyond physical tasks. Women become responsible for remembering birthdays, managing social relationships, organizing family events, and maintaining household routines. This cognitive and emotional work remains largely invisible, yet its absence would immediately disrupt family functioning.

Recognition and appreciation deficits characterize the syndrome, where women's contributions are taken for granted rather than acknowledged as valuable work. Unlike paid domestic workers who receive compensation and recognition for their services, wives' labor is often viewed as natural expressions of love rather than work deserving appreciation.

Intersectionality and multiple oppressions

The wife-as-maid syndrome cannot be understood solely through gender analysis but requires intersectional examination of how multiple identities shape women's experiences. Class positions significantly influence how domestic labor is organized, with working-class women often facing double burdens of paid employment and complete domestic responsibility, while upper-class women may delegate physical tasks while retaining emotional labor responsibilities.

Caste identities in Indian contexts create additional layers of complexity, as traditional notions of purity and pollution influence domestic task allocation. Upper-caste women may be exempted from certain physical tasks while remaining responsible for ritual and ceremonial labor that maintains family honor and social status.

Educational achievements and professional success paradoxically may intensify rather than reduce domestic expectations, as women face pressure to excel in both spheres without corresponding reductions in household responsibilities. This creates what sociologist Arlie Hochschild terms the "second shift," where women work full-time jobs and then return home to full-time domestic responsibilities.^[11]

Psychological mechanisms of normalization

The wife-as-maid syndrome persists through sophisticated psychological mechanisms that normalize exploitation and make resistance difficult. Internalized gender ideologies convince women that domestic competence reflects their worth as wives and mothers, creating internal pressure to maintain high domestic standards regardless of personal costs.^[12]

Gaslighting dynamics within households make women question their own perceptions of unfairness, as family members minimize or deny the extent of women's

contributions.^[13] When women express frustration about domestic labor distribution, they may be told they are "overreacting" or "not seeing all the ways" others contribute.^[14]

Guilt and shame mechanisms punish women for attempting to reduce their domestic responsibilities, as they face criticism for being "selfish" or "not caring about the family." These emotional manipulations make it difficult for women to establish boundaries or demand equitable arrangements.^[12]

MANIFESTATIONS OF THE SYNDROME

Physical labor dimensions

The physical aspects of the wife-as-maid syndrome encompass the full spectrum of household maintenance activities that women perform with little or no assistance. Cleaning responsibilities extend beyond basic tidiness to include deep cleaning, seasonal maintenance, and ensuring that living spaces meet family standards. Women often find themselves responsible for multiple daily cleaning cycles, from morning tidying to evening clean-up, with little recognition of the time and energy involved [Table 1].

Cooking obligations frequently involve not just meal preparation but entire food management systems, including menu planning, grocery shopping, ingredient preparation, cooking, serving, and clean-up. Women may be expected to accommodate various family members' preferences, dietary restrictions, and schedules while maintaining nutritional standards and staying within budgets.

Laundry management represents another invisible labor category, involving sorting, washing, drying, folding, and organizing clothes for multiple family members. This task often includes seasonal clothing rotation, maintaining special care items, and ensuring that family members always have clean, appropriate clothing available.

Emotional labor requirements

Emotional labor within the wife-as-maid syndrome involves managing family relationships, maintaining social connections, and providing emotional support to family members. Women become responsible for remembering important dates, organizing celebrations, maintaining correspondence with extended family, and managing household social calendars.

Conflict resolution and family harmony maintenance place women in positions where they must absorb tension, mediate disputes, and sacrifice their own needs to maintain peaceful household environments. This emotional management work requires constant attention and energy but remains largely invisible to family members.

Childcare responsibilities extend beyond basic physical care to include educational support, emotional development, social coordination, and advocacy within educational and healthcare systems. Women often become primary liaisons between families and external institutions, requiring significant time and emotional investment.

Mental load and cognitive labor

The mental load aspect of the syndrome involves the cognitive work of managing household systems, anticipating needs, and maintaining family routines. Women carry responsibility for remembering when supplies need replenishment, appointments need scheduling, and various household systems require maintenance.

Planning and coordination work includes managing multiple family schedules, organizing logistics for daily activities, and anticipating potential problems before they arise. This cognitive labor requires constant mental engagement and cannot be easily delegated or shared.

Table 1: Comparative analysis of domestic labor arrangements.

Aspect	Wife-as-maid syndrome	Equitable partnership	Hired a domestic worker
Recognition	Minimal/None	High acknowledgment	Formal recognition
Compensation	Unpaid	Shared benefits	Monetary payment
Responsibility distribution	Primarily wife	Shared based on capacity	Specified duties
Decision making	Limited input	Joint decisions	Professional autonomy
Working hours	24/7 availability	Defined boundaries	Contracted hours
Skill recognition	Taken for granted	Valued expertise	Professional skills
Rest and recreation	Minimal/Guilt-ridden	Supported and encouraged	Contractual leave
Career development	Often sacrificed	Mutually supported	Independent pursuit
Social status	Diminished	Equal partnership	Professional respect
Economic security	Dependent	Shared/Independent	Employment-based

Information management responsibilities involve staying informed about family members' needs, preferences, and schedules while maintaining awareness of household inventory, upcoming events, and external obligations. This mental work continues even when women are engaged in other activities, creating a persistent cognitive burden.

SOCIOCULTURAL REINFORCEMENT MECHANISMS

Religious and cultural narratives

Religious and cultural narratives play crucial roles in legitimizing the wife-as-maid syndrome by presenting domestic service as a spiritual duty rather than labor. Hindu concepts of "*seva*" (service) and "*tyaga*" (sacrifice) create ideological frameworks that transform exploitation into virtue, making it difficult for women to recognize or resist unfair arrangements.

Marriage rituals and ceremonies often explicitly establish women's subordinate roles within households, with symbolic practices that emphasize obedience, service, and self-sacrifice. These ceremonial elements create powerful psychological imprints that influence women's expectations and behaviors throughout their marriages.

Religious texts and traditional stories frequently celebrate women who exemplify complete devotion to domestic duties, creating cultural heroes whose worth is measured by their willingness to sacrifice personal needs for family welfare. These narratives provide ongoing reinforcement for exploitative arrangements while offering few alternative models for women's roles.

Family system dynamics

Extended family systems often intensify the wife-as-maid syndrome by expanding women's domestic responsibilities to include multiple generations and family branches. Daughters-in-law face particular pressure to demonstrate their worth through domestic service to their husbands' families, with their acceptance depending on their willingness to perform household labor uncomplainingly.

Intergenerational transmission of gender expectations occurs through modeling and direct instruction, as older women teach younger ones to accept domestic responsibilities as natural and inevitable. This creates cycles where women who have experienced exploitation reproduce similar patterns with subsequent generations.

Family honor and reputation concerns tie women's domestic performance to broader family standing within communities, creating external pressure to maintain high domestic standards regardless of personal costs. Women's domestic

competence becomes a reflection of family values and social status.

Economic dependencies

Economic dependencies created through women's exclusion from paid labor markets make resistance to domestic exploitation difficult or impossible. When women independent income sources, they may feel compelled to accept unfair domestic arrangements as part of their economic survival strategies.^[15]

Financial control mechanisms within households often prevent women from accessing resources that could reduce their domestic burdens, such as hiring domestic help or purchasing labor-saving devices.^[16] This economic control reinforces women's dependence on male family members while increasing their domestic responsibilities.

Career interruptions and limitations imposed by domestic responsibilities create long-term economic vulnerabilities that make women increasingly dependent on marriages for financial security. This dependence makes it difficult to challenge exploitative arrangements or seek alternative living situations.^[15]

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES

Identity and self-worth issues

The wife-as-maid syndrome creates profound impacts on women's sense of identity and self-worth, as their value becomes tied to their domestic performance rather than their inherent worth as human beings. Women may internalize beliefs that their primary purpose is to serve others, leading to a diminished sense of personal agency and autonomy.

Professional identity conflicts arise when women with careers and education find themselves reduced to domestic roles within their marriages. This creates cognitive dissonance between their professional capabilities and their household status, often leading to feelings of frustration and wasted potential.

Self-esteem erosion occurs gradually as women's contributions are taken for granted and their needs are consistently subordinated to family requirements. The lack of recognition and appreciation for their work creates feelings of invisibility and worthlessness that can persist even when women recognize the unfairness of their situations.

Physical and mental health consequences

Chronic stress from managing multiple responsibilities without adequate support creates significant physical health

impacts, including fatigue, sleep disruption, and stress-related illnesses. The constant pressure to maintain household standards while meeting family needs can lead to chronic exhaustion and burnout.

Mental health consequences include depression, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness that arise from being trapped in exploitative situations. Women may experience chronic resentment, anger, and sadness that they feel unable to express due to social expectations about women's roles and dispositions.

Social isolation often results from the time demands of domestic responsibilities, as women have little opportunity to maintain friendships or pursue personal interests. This isolation reduces their access to support networks and alternative perspectives that might help them recognize and address their exploitation.

Relationship dynamics and intimacy

The wife-as-maid syndrome fundamentally alters relationship dynamics between spouses, creating hierarchical rather than egalitarian partnerships.^[17,18] When women are treated as domestic workers rather than equals, it becomes difficult to maintain intimacy and mutual respect within marriages [Table 2].

Resentment and anger toward partners who benefit from but do not acknowledge women's labor create emotional distance and conflict within relationships.^[19] Women may feel unappreciated and taken for granted, while partners may feel criticized or nagged when women attempt to address inequities.

Communication breakdowns occur when women's attempts to discuss domestic labor distribution are dismissed or minimized. Partners may interpret women's desire for equity as personal attacks rather than legitimate concerns about fairness and respect.^[20]

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Systemic nature of the problem

The wife-as-maid syndrome represents a systemic issue rooted in patriarchal structures rather than individual relationship problems. Understanding this phenomenon requires examining how broader social, economic, and cultural systems create conditions that make domestic exploitation possible and probable.

Legal systems often fail to recognize domestic labor as economically valuable work, providing no protection for women whose contributions are exploited or no compensation when marriages end. This legal invisibility reinforces the notion that domestic work is not "real" work deserving of recognition or protection.

Educational systems frequently perpetuate gender stereotypes that prepare girls for domestic roles while encouraging boys to pursue careers and leadership positions. This differential preparation creates adults who enter marriages with vastly different expectations about domestic responsibilities and entitlements.

Intersections with other forms of oppression

The wife-as-maid syndrome intersects with other forms of oppression in complex ways that intensify women's

Table 2: Manifestations of wife-as-maid syndrome across different domains.

Domain	Specific manifestations	Psychological impact	Resistance strategies
Physical labor	Cleaning, cooking, laundry, maintenance	Chronic fatigue, physical strain	Task delegation, hiring help
Emotional labor	Relationship management, conflict resolution, and family harmony	Emotional exhaustion, resentment	Boundary setting, communication training
Mental load	Planning, organizing, remembering, anticipating	Cognitive overload, anxiety	Shared calendars, explicit task allocation
Childcare	Education support, healthcare coordination, and social development	Guilt, overwhelming responsibility	Co-parenting arrangements, shared duties
Social obligations	Extended family relations, community participation	Social isolation, identity loss	Selective participation, priority setting
Financial management	Budgeting, expense tracking, and financial planning	Economic anxiety, dependence	Financial literacy, independent resources
Health and wellness	Family healthcare coordination, wellness monitoring	Neglect of self-care, health issues	Self-care scheduling, health advocacy
Career support	Supporting others' careers while sacrificing own	Professional stagnation, lost opportunities	Career planning, skill development

experiences of exploitation. Race, class, caste, and other identity categories create additional layers of disadvantage that affects how domestic labor is organized and valued.

Economic inequality between partners can intensify the syndrome when women earn less than their spouses, as this income difference is often used to justify unequal domestic arrangements. However, even when women out-earn their partners, they may still shoulder disproportionate domestic responsibilities due to persistent gender expectations.

Cultural and religious minorities may face additional pressure to maintain traditional gender roles as markers of community identity, making it more difficult for women to challenge domestic arrangements without being seen as betraying their cultural heritage.

Resistance and agency

Despite the systemic nature of the wife-as-maid syndrome, women demonstrate remarkable creativity and resilience in developing strategies for resistance and reclaiming agency. Some women engage in conscious resistance by explicitly negotiating domestic labor arrangements, setting boundaries, or refusing to perform certain tasks.

Passive resistance strategies include strategic incompetence, where women deliberately perform domestic tasks poorly to discourage family members from relying on them. While this approach has limitations, it represents one way women attempt to redistribute domestic responsibilities.

Collective action and support networks among women create opportunities for sharing strategies, validating experiences, and developing alternative approaches to domestic arrangements. These networks provide crucial emotional support and practical advice for women seeking to change their circumstances.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Individual-level interventions

At the individual level, addressing the wife-as-maid syndrome requires both personal awareness and practical strategies for changing household dynamics. Women must first recognize that their domestic labor has value and that equitable arrangements are possible and desirable.

Communication skills training can help women articulate their needs and concerns more effectively while helping partners understand the extent and value of women's contributions. This includes learning to document and quantify domestic labor to make it more visible and concrete.

Boundary-setting strategies are essential for women to reclaim time and energy for their own needs and interests. This

may involve refusing to take on additional responsibilities, delegating tasks to other family members, or hiring outside help when economically feasible.

Relationship and family interventions

Couples counseling and family therapy can provide structured environments for addressing domestic labor inequities and developing more equitable arrangements. These interventions should focus on helping all family members recognize and value women's contributions while establishing a fairer distribution of responsibilities.

Education about gender roles and domestic labor can help family members understand how societal expectations have shaped their assumptions about household responsibilities. This awareness can create opportunities for renegotiating domestic arrangements based on equity rather than tradition.

Practical household management systems that explicitly assign responsibilities and rotate tasks can help create more equitable arrangements while ensuring that all necessary work is completed. These systems should include both physical and emotional labor responsibilities.

Societal and policy interventions

Legal recognition of domestic labor as economically valuable work could provide important protections for women and create incentives for more equitable arrangements. This might include provisions for compensating domestic labor in divorce settlements or social security systems that recognize unpaid work.

Educational reforms that challenge gender stereotypes and promote egalitarian relationship models could help future generations develop more equitable domestic arrangements. This includes comprehensive sex education that addresses relationship dynamics and domestic responsibility sharing.

Workplace policies that recognize employees' domestic responsibilities and provide support for balancing work and family obligations could reduce the burden on women to manage these competing demands alone. This might include flexible scheduling, parental leave policies, and childcare support.

CONCLUSION

The wife-as-maid syndrome represents a pervasive form of gender-based exploitation that operates through the apparent privacy and intimacy of domestic arrangements. By examining this phenomenon through feminist and sociocultural lenses, we can see how broader patriarchal structures create conditions where women's labor is systematically devalued and exploited within their own homes.

Understanding this syndrome as a systemic issue rather than an individual relationship problem is crucial for developing effective interventions. While individual women can develop strategies for resistance and change, addressing the root causes requires broader social, economic, and cultural transformations that challenge patriarchal assumptions about women's roles and the value of domestic labor.

The psychological toll of the wife-as-maid syndrome extends far beyond individual women to affect entire families and communities. When women's contributions are devalued and their needs ignored, it creates dysfunctional dynamics that harm all family members and perpetuate cycles of inequality across generations.

Future research should continue to explore the intersection of gender, class, race, and other identity categories in shaping women's experiences of domestic exploitation. Additionally, research on successful interventions and resistance strategies could provide valuable insights for women seeking to change their circumstances and for professionals working to support them.

The goal is not to eliminate domestic labor or family responsibilities but to create arrangements where this essential work is shared equitably, valued appropriately, and recognized as the crucial contribution it represents to both family well-being and broader social functioning. Only by challenging the invisibility and devaluation of domestic labor can we hope to create truly equitable partnerships and healthier families.

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