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# The Importance of Dignity and Faith in God in Women in the Process of Coping with Intimate Partner Violence<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY.** Intimate partner violence against women is a global public health and criminal justice problem that has enormous consequences for the health and wellbeing of millions of women all over the world. It is a form of domestic violence where, in an intimate relationship, physical or psychological acts of violence are perpetrated by a partner or spouse against the other partner or spouse. The purpose of the article is to present the dynamic of violence in an intimate couple relationship with the focus on the victim's (woman's) lost dignity. Getting the lost dignity back is the key factor in establishing healthy boundaries, building safety and protection from the violence, and the role of the faith in this context can be crucial. We will present aspects of women's faith in the Christian tradition that could serve as potential for growth, protection, and support in finishing and recovering from abusive relationships.

**KEYWORDS:** family violence, partner violence, religiosity, spirituality, religious/spiritual coping.

## Introduction

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Intimate partner violence against women is all too pervasive around the world. It continues to be one of the most life-threatening and traumatic family and public health problems in all societies. Violence against women in intimate partner relationship is the manifestation of sex discrimination and it harms the dignity of the body, of the feelings, and of the self-image of women.<sup>2</sup> There are many different forms of help and

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<sup>2</sup> Silvia Pimentel, "Special Challenges Confronting Latin American Women", in *Ours by Right: Women's Rights as Human Rights*, Ed. Joanna Kerr (London: Zed books, 1993), 31.

protection for victims (legal, social, psychological, spiritual), but reclaiming the lost dignity is the key factor in establishing healthy boundaries, and building safety and protection from the violence. In the search of the lost dignity, religion/spirituality can be crucial.

## 1. Intimate Partner Violence against Women: Definition, Prevalence, Consequences

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Intimate partner violence against women is the experience of any behaviour in an intimate couple relationship committed by a current or former partner or spouse in an intimate couple relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm against women in relationships, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and behaviour control.<sup>3</sup> The abusive partner maintains power and control over the other partner through various forms of physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual aggression, social isolation, threats, and other tactics.<sup>4</sup>

As such, intimate partner violence against women does not know geographic boundaries and is present among all age groups, races, nationalities, religions, and socioeconomic groups. Studies on the prevalence of intimate partner violence against women, based on representative samples of participants from countries around the world, show that 10–50% of women have experienced physical abuse by intimate partners once in their lives.<sup>5</sup> The World Health Organization<sup>6</sup> presented a global systematic review and synthesis of different studies on the prevalence of intimate partner violence against women. The findings showed that worldwide, almost a third (30%) of all women in a relationship experienced physical and/or sexual violence from their intimate partners.

More women sustain injuries as a result of intimate partner abuse than from the combined total of muggings and accidents . . . every 9 seconds a woman is assaulted and battered, and domestic violence is the number one cause of emergency room visits by women...<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization, *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and nonpartner sexual violence* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2013), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Maria D. McColgan et al., “Overview of the problem”, in *Intimate partner violence: A resource for professionals working with children and families*, Eds. Angelo P. Giardino, Eileen R. Giardino (St. Louis: STM Learning, Inc., 2010), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Mary C. Ellsberg, “Violence against women: A global public health crisis”, *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 34 (2006), 1.

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization, *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and nonpartner sexual violence*, 16–17.

<sup>7</sup> Albert R. Roberts and Beverly Schenkman Roberts, *Ending intimate abuse: Practical guidance and survival strategies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

Intimate partner violence against women has many negative consequences. Due to its prevalence, it is a global public health problem that negatively affects a woman's ability to live fully and productively. Intimate partner violence is harmful, dangerous, and sometimes lethal. For some of victims the abuse consists of one incident, but for most women the abuse increases in severity and frequency over time. Especially chronic abuse has severe effects on the health and mental health of abuse survivors.<sup>8</sup> Intimate partner violence also creates extreme emotional pressure, with overwhelming fear and anxiety, confusion, guilt, (learned) helplessness, derogation, humiliation and negative self-perception.<sup>9</sup> Through intimidation and manipulation, the abuser usually creates the dynamics of dependence and isolation by trying to shatter the victim's sense of autonomy and dignity.<sup>10</sup> In this way, a closed world is created, impermeable to outside influences and conventional morality.<sup>11</sup> This results in numerous physical and mental health issues for women, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and low self-esteem.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. The Loss of Integrity and Dignity in Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence is usually chronic and consists of repetitive destructive violent patterns in an intimate couple relationship<sup>13</sup>, the so called "cycle of violence" where particular psychological dynamics can be recognized.<sup>14</sup> Those dynamics explain why it is so difficult for the victim to leave or somehow end this violent relationship. Many women are ashamed of being abused. They are not comfortable with the idea of others knowing about their abuse.<sup>15</sup> The victim can reconcile with and adapt to violence, because the intensity of violence increases gradually over a long period of time, and victim "gets used" to the life of constant abuse, so that she no longer perceives

<sup>8</sup> Albert R. Roberts, Gina Robertiello and Kimberly Bender, "National Survey of 107 Shelters for Battered Women and Their Children", in *Battered Women and Their Families*, Eds. Albert R. Roberts, Barbara W. White (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2007), 109.

<sup>9</sup> Carolyn Elizabeth Senter and Karen Caldwell, "Spirituality and the maintenance of change: A phenomenological study of women who leave abusive relationships", *Contemporary Family Therapy* 24 (2002), 544.

<sup>10</sup> Alda Maria Sousa Gant, "Domestic violence against women as a human rights violation", *Revista do Instituto Brasileiro de Direitos Humanos* 3 (2002), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald D. Crelinsten, "Violence in Prisons/Torture", in *International Handbook of Violence Research*, Eds. Wilhelm Heitmeyer, John Hagan (New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 201.

<sup>12</sup> Gunnur Karakurt, Douglas Smith and Jason Whiting, "Impact of intimate partner violence on women's mental health", *Journal of Family Violence* 29 (2014), 693–695.

<sup>13</sup> Marie Mele, "The time course of repeat intimate partner violence", *Journal of Family Violence* 24 (2009), 619.

<sup>14</sup> Lenore E. Walker, *The battered woman* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> Albert R. Roberts, "Overview and new directions for intervening on behalf of battered women", in *Battered women and their families*, ed. Albert R. Roberts (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2007), 6.

that she lives in a repetitive pattern of violence.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, intimate partner violence has a specific emotional dynamic, where specific psychological responses and adaptations to the victims occur. Through intimidation and manipulation, many batterers encourage dependency in their victims and isolate them in an attempt to destroy their sense of autonomy and dignity, often imprisoning them in their own homes and the narrow patterns of their domestic lives. The abusers create a kind of a closed world, impermeable to outside influences and conventional morality, a world that is quite comparable to the closed world of a torturer. In this captivity, the victim experiences dehumanization.<sup>17</sup> She loses the sense of power and control, the right to freedom, choice and autonomy, thereby losing the sense of dignity.

Dignity is the inherent nature that renders human beings capable of autonomous action and thought. Dignity recognizes human beings are autonomous in determining fundamental questions affecting the meaning of their lives. Dignity is not contingent on whether individuals access the opportunity or how they exercise this capacity – every human being deserves his/her dignity. But an individual can lose the sense of dignity. For the sense of human dignity, individuals must have both the opportunity and capacity to make personal, fundamental decisions. In considering how dignity relates to intimate partner violence, we can see that these capabilities, such as bodily health and integrity, emotions, practical decisions, affiliation and control over victim's environment, are negatively affected. But only when the female victim can choose and control the options of how to address domestic violence, women's agency is promoted and this can help decrease the risk of further victimization and re-victimization.<sup>18</sup> In order to effectively face violence in intimate partner relationship, the sense of dignity in the victim in an abusive relationship should be strengthened. Dignity comes from the sense of power and autonomy, and victims need a lot of material, physical and legal support and protection, as well as an inner sense of being able and competent to handle the situation.<sup>19</sup>

### **3. The Role of Religious/Spiritual Aspects in Coping with Intimate Partner Violence**

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In coping with intimate partner violence and its consequences, victims develop different ways of coping which can be more or less functional. Coping strategies can be destructive (e. g. self-appeasement and refusal to seek help from family or friends,

<sup>16</sup> Deborah K. Anderson and Daniel G. Saunders, "Leaving an abusive partner: An Empirical Review of Predictors, the Process of Leaving, and Psychological Well-Being", *Trauma, violence, & abuse* 4 (2003), 170.

<sup>17</sup> Crelinsten, "Violence in Prisons/Torture", 201.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret E. Johnson, "A Home with Dignity: Domestic Violence and Property Rights", *Brigham Young University Law Review* 1 (2014), 9–10.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Mills, *The heart of intimate abuse* (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 1998), 42–43.

portraying the relationship with the bully in a more positive light, denying abuse or violence, and learned helplessness<sup>20</sup>) or constructive (e.g. active seeking of various forms of social support and assistance, or using internal resources such as self-protection, hope, and spirituality).<sup>21</sup> Constructive coping strategies with intimate partner violence can be built only if the victims possess strong internal resources, which will enhance the capacity for resilience and growth aftermath the abuse.<sup>22</sup> Among these internal resources there are a sense of self-worth involving self-perception and a recognition of worth and a sense of belonging (to the family or the wider community). This means that person should recognize her own identity and worth, or in other words, gain her sense of dignity.<sup>23</sup> Restoring and respecting a person's dignity is mainly achieved through the combination of various activities (like systemic protection and assistance), but also through spirituality and religious aspects. Intimate partner violence is a specific form of trauma where spirituality/religiosity (especially positive religious coping) can play a major role for victims, helping to reshape their perceptions, establish new behaviours, and promote recovery by providing hope and preventing feelings of helplessness when enabling survivors to find meaning and purpose in life events and suffering.<sup>24</sup> Religious aspects and spirituality can help to establish new integrity and gain a sense of dignity.

#### 4. Aspects of Christian Spirituality in Effective Coping with Intimate Partner Violence

The purpose of this paper is to present the factors that within Christian teaching and tradition, and also in pastoral care of marriage and family provided by Church, represent protection and support in the prevention of intimate partner violence and recovery from violence by supporting the sense of dignity of the victims. We conducted a systematic review of recent scientific articles and studies that investigated violence against women in intimate couple relationship in relation to religious aspects, and we identified five factors in Christian teaching, tradition and pastoral care that can be effective coping mechanisms for female victims of intimate partner violence.

<sup>20</sup> Hisham Abu-Raiya et al., "The relationships between religious coping and mental and physical health among female survivors of intimate partner violence in Israel", *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9 (2017), 70–71.

<sup>21</sup> Noelle M. St. Vil et al., "A qualitative study of survival strategies used by low-income black women who experience intimate partner violence", *Social Work* 62 (2017), 63–64.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson and Saunders, "Leaving an abusive partner: An Empirical Review of Predictors, the Process of Leaving, and Psychological Well-Being", 184.

<sup>23</sup> Valerie M. Meredith, "Victim identity and respect for human dignity: a terminological analysis", *International Review of The Red Cross* 91 (2009), 270–271.

<sup>24</sup> Dawnvise N. Fowler and Michele A. Rountree, "Exploring the meaning and role of spirituality for women survivors of intimate partner abuse", *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 64 (2010), 2–3.

#### 4.1 Power of Religious Practice

There are correlations between external aspects of religiosity (church attendance and rituals, prayer, Bible reading) and a lower incidence of intimate partner violence.<sup>25</sup> Attending religious services promotes a level of social integration and support which is negatively correlated with the incidence of intimate partner violence and reduces the risk of drug and alcohol use which is positively correlated with the incidence of intimate partner violence.<sup>26</sup> Religious activity is also helpful for the victims of intimate partner violence, as it helps maintain a living relationship with God.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.2 Religious Community as a Source of Help

Many (religious) female victims, in seeking a support, turn to other members of the religious community when dealing with intimate partner violence. It is very helpful if the community listens to them, trusts them, and offers support in their coping with intimate partner violence: they feel plenty of emotional support, a sense of belonging, and security<sup>28</sup>, which is especially important because the violent partner isolates the victim or tries to do so. The support network for victims of intimate partner violence, where it exists in the church community, is of great help to victims.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.3 Supportive Response from Religious Leaders/Priests

Many victims also seek support from priests whom they trust.<sup>30</sup> It is important for victims if they are given compassionate support, advice, practical help, comfort, and a

<sup>25</sup> Rene Drumm et al., "God just brought me through it: Spiritual coping strategies for resilience among intimate partner violence survivors", *Clinical Social Work Journal* 42 (2014), 389; Jong Hyun Jung and Daniel V. A. Olson, "Where does religion matter most? Personal religiosity and the acceptability of wife-beating in cross-national perspective", *Sociological Inquiry* 87 (2017), 624.

<sup>26</sup> Carol B. Cunradi, Raul Caetano and John Schafer, "Religious affiliation, denominational homogeneity, and intimate partner violence among U.S. couples", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41 (2002), 147; Christopher G. Ellison and Kristin L. Anderson, "Religious involvement and domestic violence among US couples", *Journal for the scientific study of religion* 40 (2001), 280–282; Christina G. Watlington and Christopher M. Murphy, "The roles of religion and spirituality among African American survivors of domestic violence", *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 62 (2006), 851–852.

<sup>27</sup> Drumm et al., "God just brought me through it: Spiritual coping strategies for resilience among intimate partner violence survivors", 390; St. Vil et al., "A qualitative study of survival strategies used by low-income black women who experience intimate partner violence", 65–66.

<sup>28</sup> Kim M. Anderson, Lynette M. Renner and Fran S. Danis, "Recovery: Resilience and growth, in the aftermath of domestic violence", *Violence Against Women* 18 (2012), 1290–1291.

<sup>29</sup> Loretta Pyles, "The complexities of the religious response to domestic violence implications for faith-based initiatives", *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work* 22 (2007), 285–286.

<sup>30</sup> Joyce A. Neergaard et al., "Women experiencing intimate partner violence: Effects of confiding in religious leaders", *Pastoral Psychology* 55 (2007), 773; Pyles, "The complexities of the religious response to domestic violence implications for faith-based initiatives", 287.

sense of belonging.<sup>31</sup> It is crucial for victims that priests listen to how intimate partner violence affects their lives and guide them in their (religious) doubts about taking action against intimate partner violence.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4.4 Importance of Positive contents of Religious Teaching

It helps victims to lean in the contents of religious teaching on the parts that emphasize the importance of mutual respect, true love and self-care. These aspects empower the victim and lead to proactive self-care and self-protection, helps her to gain dignity and self-worth, and empowers her to take the necessary steps to effectively cope with the intimate partner violence situation.<sup>33</sup> Numerous religious topics, prayers, and archetypes (biblical stories, the victory of good over evil, the meaning of suffering) can help stop an abusive relationship, understand the experience and place it in life context.<sup>34</sup> An important part of these contents is hope that victims include in their lives so that they can fight abuse. The emphasis on the process of (healthy) forgiveness leads victims to growth and reinforces hope for a better future.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4.5 Personal Relationship with God

Many female victims of intimate partner violence report that a deep and personal relationship with God is a place where they gain strength and affirmation for their thinking and action, as well as helping them recover after intimate partner violence.<sup>36</sup> In doing so, they emphasize the importance of a true and genuine relationship with God in coping with a stressful event.<sup>37</sup> In a deep relationship and dialogue with God, victims feel that He is the source of strength, protection, love, and hope that gives them the power to act and cares for them.<sup>38</sup> In the relationship with God they re-evaluate

<sup>31</sup> Anderson, Renner and Danis, "Recovery: Resilience and growth, in the aftermath of domestic violence", 1291; Lindsay B. Gezinski, Kwynn M. Gonzalez-Pons and Mallory M. Rogers. "Praying does not stop his fist from hitting my face: Religion and intimate partner violence from the perspective of survivors and service providers", *Journal of Family Issues* (online) (2019), 13.

<sup>32</sup> Sharon G. Horne and Heidi M. Levitt, "Shelter from the raging wind: religious needs of victims of intimate partner violence and faith leaders' responses", *Journal of Religion & Abuse* 5 (2003), 89–91.

<sup>33</sup> Nicole Knickmeyer et al., "Responding to mixed messages and double binds: religious oriented coping strategies of Christian battered women", *Journal of Religion & Abuse* 5 (2003), 42–43.

<sup>34</sup> Shondrah Tarrezz Nash and Latonya Hesterberg, "Biblical framings of and responses to spousal violence in the narratives of abused Christian women", *Violence Against Women* 15 (2009), 354–356.

<sup>35</sup> Watlington and Murphy, "The roles of religion and spirituality among African American survivors of domestic violence", 850–851.

<sup>36</sup> Mei-Chuan Wang et al., "Christian women in IPV relationships: An exploratory study of religious factors", *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 28 (2009), 232–233.

<sup>37</sup> Drumm et al., "God just brought me through it: Spiritual coping strategies for resilience among intimate partner violence survivors", 390; Horne and Levitt, "Shelter from the raging wind: religious needs of victims of intimate partner violence and faith leaders' responses", 88–89.

<sup>38</sup> Anderson, Renner and Danis, "Recovery: Resilience and growth, in the aftermath of domestic violence", 1289–1290; Drumm et al., "God just brought me through it: Spiritual coping strategies for resilience among intimate partner violence survivors", 391.

their self-perception, put their own safety and well-being first and act proactively.<sup>39</sup> Because of such powerful ally they do not feel so isolated<sup>40</sup> and also find it easier to seek help elsewhere (family, shelters, judicial system).<sup>41</sup> Victims recognize personal relationship with God as an inner strength that helps them process the consequences of intimate partner violence, and helps regulate behavioural responses in a positive way.<sup>42</sup> In their relationship with God, victims experience a personal transformation when they can see the experience of intimate partner violence and the meaning of life in a different light. Their connection with God gives them a sense of the meaning, purpose and value of life, the areas that are especially severely tested in the victims of violence.<sup>43</sup> Through a genuine and secure relationship with God, where negative feelings are also processed, victims also grow personally and spiritually as they discover the foundations of their own dignity, value and worth.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

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In spirituality or religiosity within the Christian tradition there are some overt or covert mechanisms, which are an important correlating factor in appropriate action in coping with intimate partner violence and its consequences in female victims. Victims use spiritual-religious coping strategies both to successfully face the concrete challenges of intimate partner violence (problem-focused strategy) and to regulate difficult emotions (emotion-focused strategy). Typically, spirituality in these processes is an important source of strength in enduring trials.<sup>45</sup> Victims who engage in religious and spiritual aspects in coping with intimate partner violence retain a greater sense of meaning and purpose after trauma and experience lower levels of stress.<sup>46</sup> This is facilitated by various factors which we have identified as positive aspects of Christian

<sup>39</sup> Knickmeyer et al., "Responding to mixed messages and double binds: religious oriented coping strategies of Christian battered women", 44–47; Tarrezz Nash and Hesterberg, "Biblical framings of and responses to spousal violence in the narratives of abused Christian women", 356.

<sup>40</sup> Senter and Caldwell, "Spirituality and the maintenance of change: A phenomenological study of women who leave abusive relationships", 556–558.

<sup>41</sup> Hillary Potter, "Battered Black women's use of religious services and spirituality for assistance in leaving abusive relationships", *Violence Against Women* 13 (2007), 272.

<sup>42</sup> Fowler and Rountree, "Exploring the meaning and role of spirituality for women survivors of intimate partner abuse", 8–10.

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, Renner and Danis, "Recovery: Resilience and growth, in the aftermath of domestic violence", 1289–1290.

<sup>44</sup> Drumm et al., "God just brought me through it: Spiritual coping strategies for resilience among intimate partner violence survivors", 390; Senter and Caldwell, "Spirituality and the maintenance of change: A phenomenological study of women who leave abusive relationships", 559–561.

<sup>45</sup> Drumm et al., "God just brought me through it: Spiritual coping strategies for resilience among intimate partner violence survivors", 386.

<sup>46</sup> Michelle M. Lilly, Kathryn H. Howell and Sandra Graham-Bermann, "World assumptions, religiosity, and PTSD in survivors of intimate partner violence", *Violence Against Women* 21 (2015), 88–89.



religiosity and spirituality that prevent intimate partner violence or help to save the victim from such a relationship and recover from it: religious practice (religious activity, church attendance, prayer, rituals), connection with the community (support, protection, security), the response of religious leaders (guidance, help, support, advice, consolation), the positive aspects of religious teaching (contents that emphasize respect, love, hope, forgiveness, self-care and protection of one's own dignity) and a profound personal relationship with God. Especially the last one is at the heart of the overall transformation of the intimate partner violence experience. The power of a deep and personal relationship with God allows for a deeper re-evaluation of the female victim position and action. A deep, solid, and genuine personal relationship with God, who is an important person to the victim and has an important place in her intimate world, is a haven and refuge that soothes, gives firmness and power, and strengthens the sense of dignity.<sup>47</sup> Where there is no such connection, the person clings to external criteria instead of trusting herself and her experience, and relying on her own internal assets.

Religious/spiritual aspects are not always healing mechanisms *per se*, but they can be used as mechanisms to help and support the termination of intimate partner violence, and recovery from it. We can certainly say that in combination with other factors they contribute to its prevention. In understanding the dynamics of violence and the creation of appropriate support for the female victims of violence, it is also sensible to consider the role of faith (religious and spiritual aspects), which heightens the sense of dignity and enables the transformation of complex causes of persisting in violent relationships and recovery from them.

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## **ORUMO IR TIKĖJIMO Į DIEVĄ SVARBA MOTERIMS PRIEŠINANTIS INTYMAUS PARTNERIO SMURTUI**

### **S a n t r a u k a**

Intymaus partnerio smurtas prieš moterį yra pasaulinė visuomenės sveikatos ir baudžiamosios teisės problema, turinti milžiniškas pasekmes milijonų moterų visame pasaulyje gerovei. Tai smurto artimojoje aplinkoje forma, kai intymių santykių metu partneris ar sutuoktinis kito partnerio ar sutuoktinio atžvilgiu fiziškai ar psichologiškai smurtauja. Straipsnio tikslas – pristatyti smurto dinamiką intymiuose poros santykiuose, sutelkiant dėmesį į aukos (moters) prarastą orumą. Siekiant atgauti prarastą orumą, esmingai svarbu nustatyti sveikas ribas, kurti saugumą ir apsaugą nuo smurto, o tikėjimo vaidmuo šiame kontekste gali būti lemiamas. Pateikiame tuos moterų krikščioniškojo tikėjimo aspektus, kurie gali padėti augti, būti apsauga ir parama nutraukiant priekabiavimu ir užgaule grįstus santykius ir nuo jų atsigaunant.

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**RAKTAŽODŽIAI:** smurtas šeimoje, partnerio smurtas, religingumas, dvasingumas, religinis / dvasinis priešinimasis.

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