



Women's Political Communication in Maluku: Opportunities, Challenges, and Socio-Cultural Dynamics

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Abstract. *This study examines women's political communication in Maluku, focusing on the opportunities, challenges, and socio-cultural dynamics they face. In a region strongly influenced by patriarchal culture, women's roles in politics are often constrained by traditional social views and resistance to their involvement in a male-dominated political arena. The complexity of this issue is heightened by the perception that politics is a harsh and competitive domain. The aim of this research is to understand the communication strategies used by female politicians in Maluku and to identify the factors that influence their success or failure in the political field. This study employs a qualitative method, gathering data through in-depth interviews with female politicians, activists, and political observers in Maluku. The findings reveal that despite significant challenges, female politicians are able to leverage local values such as community solidarity and the adat-based social system to strengthen their political positions. Additionally, social networks and support from women's groups and political organizations play crucial roles in their political communication strategies. Women's roles in Maluku politics are not limited to verbal and non-verbal communication but also include their ability to integrate local values and utilize their central societal roles to promote political agendas. These findings provide a significant contribution to the study of women's political communication, particularly in contexts that have been underexplored in both national and international literature. The research concludes that women's political communication in Maluku is a complex adaptation to the local socio-cultural context.*

Keywords: *Political Communication, Female Politicians, Patriarchal Culture, Local Values, Social Networks.*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini mengkaji komunikasi politik perempuan di Maluku dalam konteks peluang, tantangan, dan dinamika sosial-budaya. Di wilayah yang masih kuat dipengaruhi oleh budaya patriarki, peran perempuan dalam politik seringkali dibatasi oleh pandangan sosial tradisional dan resistensi terhadap keterlibatan mereka di arena politik yang dianggap maskulin. Masalah ini menjadi semakin kompleks karena politik masih dilihat sebagai domain yang keras dan kompetitif. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami strategi komunikasi yang digunakan oleh perempuan politisi di Maluku serta mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi keberhasilan atau kegagalan mereka dalam dunia politik. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap perempuan politisi, aktivis, dan pengamat politik di Maluku. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun perempuan politisi menghadapi tantangan signifikan, mereka mampu memanfaatkan nilai-nilai lokal seperti solidaritas komunitas dan sistem sosial berbasis adat untuk memperkuat posisi politik mereka. Selain itu, jaringan sosial dan dukungan dari kelompok perempuan serta organisasi politik menjadi faktor penting dalam strategi komunikasi politik mereka. Tidak hanya terbatas pada komunikasi verbal dan non-verbal, peran perempuan dalam politik di Maluku juga mencakup kemampuan mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai lokal dan memanfaatkan posisi sentral mereka dalam masyarakat untuk mempromosikan agenda politik. Temuan penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi baru dalam kajian komunikasi politik perempuan, khususnya di wilayah yang kurang terekspos dalam literatur nasional dan internasional. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa komunikasi politik perempuan di Maluku adalah bentuk adaptasi yang kompleks terhadap konteks sosial-budaya setempat.

Kata kunci: Komunikasi Politik, Politisi Perempuan, Budaya Patriarki, Nilai-Nilai Lokal, Jaringan Sosial

1. BACKGROUND

The role of women in politics in Indonesia has undergone various significant changes; however, in certain regions, including Maluku, female politicians still face highly complex challenges (Afdhal, 2023; Ramdhan & Afdhal, 2023). In areas steeped in patriarchal culture, women are often confronted with traditional views that place them in subordinate positions within the social structure (Mayrudin et al., 2022). This is evident in the limited representation of women in formal political spheres, both in legislative and executive roles, suggesting that their involvement is still seen as an anomaly. Furthermore, women's political communication frequently encounters resistance and social stigma, hampering its effectiveness (Tondang et al., 2023).

In this context, it is crucial to understand how women in Maluku navigate the harsh political environment, where their social roles are bound by customary norms that historically restrict their movements. Despite various national initiatives to increase women's political participation, female politicians in Maluku continue to face unique challenges that remain largely unexplored in academic research (Tondang et al., 2023; Wahyudi, 2018). Therefore, this study is urgently needed, not only to reveal the challenges they face but also to explore the political communication strategies employed by women as they strive for political positions within a predominantly masculine social system.

Research on women's political communication has continued to grow over the past two decades, particularly with the global increase in awareness of gender equality in politics (Nazrul, 2024; Prillaman, 2023). In Indonesia, studies on women's political communication tend to focus on the structural and social barriers faced by female politicians. Farkas & Bene, (2021) and Klinger & Svensson (2023) emphasize that women often struggle to leverage mass media as a tool for political communication due to male dominance in the media landscape. These studies find that female politicians are frequently disadvantaged in media coverage, which tends to highlight personal aspects over their political capabilities.

Additionally, Krasniqi (2021) highlights another challenge: the cultural resistance rooted in patriarchy that limits women's space in politics. This research finds that women's political communication in rural Indonesia is more constrained than in urban areas, where traditional norms are still highly influential. This aligns with Cárdenas & Hedström (2021), who show that women in eastern Indonesia face dual barriers: not only gender-based challenges but also geographical isolation and limited access to political resources.

Knott & Kostovicova (2024) and Muñoz-Puig (2024) add an essential dimension regarding the limitations women face in building extensive political networks. Both highlight that female politicians in areas with strong patriarchal traditions, including Maluku, struggle to establish effective political networks due to limited access to male-dominated power circles. In this context, women in Maluku face distinct challenges compared to their peers in other regions. Traditional norms, such as patron-client and hierarchical kinship structures, impose unique restrictions on how women engage in politics.

Nonetheless, some research has begun to indicate a rise in the role of women in politics in eastern Indonesia. For instance, Ramdhan & Afdhal (2023) and Afdhal (2023) reveal that indigenous women's organizations are starting to play a crucial role in promoting women's political participation. Although still limited, these organizations provide a social network that female politicians can rely on to navigate the political sphere.

However, a review of existing literature shows that studies on women's political communication in Maluku remain sparse. Previous research often focuses solely on structural and social challenges without giving sufficient attention to how women leverage local values, such as *pela* and *gandong*, to strengthen their political communication. Deeper studies are needed to understand this dimension, especially in Maluku, which has its own socio-cultural dynamics.

This study offers novelty in several dimensions. *First*, it specifically examines how female politicians in Maluku develop political communication integrated with local values. Unlike previous studies that focus more on the obstacles women face in political communication, this research highlights the adaptive and innovative strategies they employ to meet these challenges. *Second*, it provides a new perspective on how female politicians utilize indigenous social capital. Local values like *pela* and *gandong* are rarely explored as political tools in prior studies. In this context, the study demonstrates how women use kinship ties and community solidarity as social capital to build their political legitimacy. This approach contrasts with earlier studies, which generally overlook the role of local culture in women's political communication. *Third*, the study positions female politicians as agents of change rather than mere victims of patriarchal structures. In much of the literature, women are often depicted passively, as if they are merely objects of political barriers. Conversely, this study highlights how women actively build strategies and utilize local resources to overcome challenges, providing new insights into the role of women in politics within regions marked by strong patriarchal cultures.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

Several key theories are employed in this study, namely political communication theory, gender theory, and social capital theory. These theories are relevant for understanding the dynamics of political communication among women in Maluku. They also help contextualize the challenges and political communication strategies adopted by female politicians in regions deeply rooted in strong patriarchal norms.

Political Communication Theory

Political communication refers to the process of exchanging information, messages, and symbols within a political context (McNair, 2011). His theory highlights how political actors, including female politicians, use media and social interaction to influence public opinion, build image, and gain support. In this study, political communication theory is used to understand the strategies female politicians in Maluku employ to convey their political messages, both verbally and non-verbally, in an environment dominated by patriarchal structures.

According to Denton & Woodward (2014), political communication encompasses not only speaking or presentation skills but also strategies for building strong interpersonal relationships, especially at the local level. In Maluku's context, female politicians must be able to negotiate with customary norms that often limit their involvement in the public sphere, including politics. Therefore, women's political communication in Maluku is seen not only as an effort to convey messages to the public but also as a complex adaptation process to prevailing social and cultural values..

Gender and Politics Theory

Gender theory in politics largely focuses on how gender power relations influence political participation (Connell, 1987). Connell introduces the concept of "hegemonic masculinity," a form of male dominance that reinforces women's subordinate roles in society. In politics, this affects how women are perceived and expected to behave. In regions like Maluku, patriarchal norms tend to solidify hegemonic masculinity, which limits women's opportunities in the political arena. However, some research shows that women do not always conform to these norms. For instance, Krook & Norris's (2014) study on women's political participation reveals that women often develop adaptive and resistant strategies to overcome existing constraints. In this study's

context, female politicians in Maluku may adopt strategies that challenge patriarchal norms while respecting local values to achieve political legitimacy.

Additionally, the theory of gendered mediation (Ross & Carter, 2011) is relevant for understanding how the media and the public perceive female politicians. According to this theory, the media often treats female politicians differently from male politicians, frequently focusing more on their personal lives and gender rather than their political abilities. This becomes relevant in understanding the challenges female politicians in Maluku face, who may experience gender bias in their public representation and political communication.

Social Capital Theory

The social capital theory proposed by Putnam (1993) and Woolcock (1998) is highly relevant for understanding how female politicians in Maluku build social networks to strengthen their political positions. Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and social trust that enable individuals or groups to cooperate more effectively. In a political context, social capital can help female politicians gain community support and leverage existing networks to strengthen their position within a male-dominated political system.

In this study, local values such as *pela* and *gandong* in Maluku function as unique forms of social capital. The strong kinship and inter-community solidarity maintained through customary practices serve as a source of strength for female politicians. They use the social bonds fostered through this customary system to gain broader political support and build legitimacy within their communities. Woolcock's (1998) study shows that social capital often becomes an important resource for marginalized groups, including women, in expanding their political influence.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, a qualitative approach was chosen with a case study method to deeply explore the dynamics of political communication among women in Maluku. This approach is designed to understand the complex phenomenon of political communication within a unique socio-cultural context, particularly in regions where patriarchal norms remain prevalent. The case study method allows the researcher to explore how female politicians navigate the social and cultural challenges they face, and how they utilize social networks and local values such as *pela* and *gandong* in articulating their roles in politics (Yin, 2014).

This research was conducted in several areas in Maluku, with a primary focus on the city of Ambon and some surrounding traditional regions. Ambon was chosen as it is the political center of Maluku, while the surrounding traditional areas provide a different local context for understanding the political challenges faced by women. The selection of these locations takes into account the strategic roles of women in local communities as well as their interactions with dominant political structures.

The research informants consist of female politicians with a minimum of five years of experience in local politics, either in parliament or as activists, as well as relevant community figures and traditional leaders. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that informants have substantial experience in addressing political and social challenges. By selecting 15-20 suitable informants, the data collected is expected to reflect the diversity of political communication experiences among women in Maluku (Patton, 2002).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews provided informants with opportunities to share their personal views and experiences regarding the challenges and communication strategies they employ in politics. These semi-structured interviews maintained focus on the research topic while allowing informants to freely explore their experiences (Moleong, 2021). Additionally, participant observation was conducted at local political and social events to gain a direct understanding of political communication dynamics on the ground. Document analysis was also performed on various policy documents, local news reports, and meeting records related to female politicians to reinforce findings from interviews and observations.

The data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the systematic identification of key themes that emerge from the data. These themes include communication strategies, patriarchal cultural challenges, and the role of social capital in supporting women's political success. This analytical technique was chosen for its capacity to capture the complexities of social and political interactions central to the research focus (Braun & Clarke, 2016). To ensure data validity and reliability, triangulation was used. Data from interviews, observations, and documents were compared to verify consistency and accuracy. Triangulation is essential for reducing bias and providing a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). All research processes were conducted with consideration for social research ethics, including obtaining informants' consent and safeguarding their identities to prevent potential negative impacts on their political careers (Flick, 2014).

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Local Value-Based Collaboration as a Strategic Strength

The first finding of this research indicates that female politicians in Maluku develop political communication strategies heavily influenced by local traditional values such as *pela* and *gandong*. Based on in-depth interviews with informants, these values play a central role in shaping how women interact with their constituents. *Pela* and *gandong*, which emphasize brotherhood, solidarity, and cross-community cooperation, provide a social framework for female politicians to build strong social networks and gain support from various groups, including traditional and local community groups. One informant noted, “In Maluku, if we only talk about personal or specific group interests, it’s hard to gain acceptance. Women have to show that they represent more than that, that they are fighting for a broader connection like *gandong*. That’s what makes the support solid.”

This informant illustrates how the power of social networks established through traditional kinship ties gives female politicians broader access to political resources and community support. This contributes to their ability to address political and social challenges stemming from the strong patriarchal dynamics in the region.

The communication strategies employed by female politicians in Maluku also have distinctive characteristics. They tend to adopt a more collaborative and inclusive communication approach, different from the more confrontational masculine approach. In various local political forums, female politicians prefer to facilitate dialogue, create a space for consensus, and prioritize harmony in decision-making. Observations of several political meetings show that female politicians tend to seek solutions that maintain social relationships and avoid open conflicts that could damage community solidarity.

Another informant explained, “As women, we often use a more embracing approach, finding middle ground in political debates. For us, maintaining good relations with everyone is a priority. This is different from men who may more often act aggressively or confrontationally.”

This dialogic approach not only makes them more accepted within the communities they represent but also builds their image as politicians who care and are sensitive to collective interests. This directly influences their popularity among constituents, who appreciate the collaborative attitude and social harmony.

These findings reflect political communication theory, which emphasizes that the forms and strategies of political communication are heavily influenced by the cultural and social context in which political actors operate. According to Norris (2011), political communication is not just about transferring messages from one party to another but is also shaped by the existing social structure and network of relationships in society. In the context of Maluku, traditional values such as *pela* and *gandong* are not merely cultural elements; they also serve as social capital that supports women's involvement in politics.

These traditional values not only shape the identity of female politicians but also provide them with a unique strategic strength. By leveraging the values of brotherhood and kinship networks, female politicians are able to navigate the political world, which is often perceived as harsh and masculine. This contrasts with political communication approaches more commonly documented in previous literature, which portray female politicians as actors facing significant challenges in penetrating a confrontational and often discriminatory political domain (Basu, 2020; Sapiro, 2019). This study's findings show that in Maluku, female politicians can transform these barriers into opportunities through a collaborative approach rooted in strong social values.

This approach can also be analyzed through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's social capital theory. Bourdieu (1990) emphasizes that social capital is not only composed of the social relationships an individual possesses but also the access to resources and power mediated by those relationships. In the case of female politicians in Maluku, traditional networks like *pela* and *gandong* become sources of social capital that allow them to access political support, both morally and materially. This social capital serves as a tool enabling them to negotiate more effectively within a male-dominated political context.

Additionally, these findings support Putnam (1993) argument on the importance of social capital in strengthening social cohesion and political effectiveness. Through social capital formed from traditional values, female politicians in Maluku are able to reinforce constituent support and build deep trust within their communities. This becomes an essential element of their political success, as local community support is one of the main pillars of political success in this region.

Adaptation of Patriarchal Culture: Slow but Significant Social Change

This research reveals that patriarchal culture remains a major challenge for female politicians in Maluku. Most of the informants interviewed stated that they often face significant resistance from male political figures. This resistance is not only evident in

public discourse or political campaigns but also in more closed decision-making spaces, such as parliamentary and political party meetings. One informant mentioned, “In parliament, my opinions are often not taken seriously. I feel more like a complement, while major decisions are usually made by men. This makes it difficult for us to play an active role, especially on strategic issues.”

This statement illustrates the experience of female politicians who are often marginalized in political decision-making. The deeply rooted patriarchal culture in Maluku society reinforces the view that women should play a complementary role rather than serve as primary leaders in politics. This resistance is not only individual but also structural, as social norms are still steeped in traditional gender roles.

Observational data from political campaigns in Maluku show that female politicians are often considered more suitable to handle issues traditionally seen as “feminine,” such as education, health, and social welfare. In various campaigns, they are frequently focused on addressing social issues, while economic and security issues, considered more “masculine,” are usually dominated by male politicians. This reflects deep-rooted gender stereotypes in societal perceptions. One informant shared, “During campaigns, people usually assume I know more about education or child welfare. When it comes to the economy or security, they tend to listen to men. This makes it challenging for us to be recognized as leaders capable of handling a range of important issues.”

Such societal views create structural obstacles for female politicians to build legitimacy and authority in broader politics. These findings about the challenges of patriarchal culture align with existing literature, which indicates that patriarchy is one of the main barriers for women to engage actively and be acknowledged as legitimate political actors (Basu, 2020; Sapiro, 2019). Patriarchy creates a social structure that places women in subordinate positions, hindering their involvement in decision-making processes and limiting their roles within formal political realms. In Maluku, this patriarchal culture is influenced not only by the national context but also reinforced by certain traditional values that still position women as supporting figures in society.

However, an interesting aspect of this finding is the dynamic adaptation within Maluku's patriarchal culture. Although patriarchy remains an obstacle, female politicians in Maluku are beginning to leverage progressive traditional values like *gandong* to challenge traditional norms. *Gandong* emphasizes the principles of brotherhood and equality, which provide space for women to take on more significant roles in the public domain. This can be seen in some campaigns and political meetings where female

politicians use traditional rhetoric to articulate their positions as leaders. One informant noted, "I always emphasize *gandong* values when speaking to the community. These values not only strengthen social ties but also remind everyone that we are all equal in decision-making, including in politics."

This approach demonstrates that female politicians in Maluku are not merely passive recipients of patriarchal culture but also active agents of change, using cultural elements to restructure their roles in politics. This aligns with Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration, which posits that social actors have the capacity to actively shape and transform existing social structures (Giddens, 2008; Giddens & Sutton, 2021). In this context, female politicians in Maluku use traditional values as sources of social capital to navigate and even challenge the dominant patriarchy.

Pierre Bourdieu's social capital theory is also relevant in understanding how female politicians in Maluku utilize traditional values like *gandong*. Bourdieu (1986) explains that social capital consists of social networks and resources that can be mobilized to gain advantages in various fields, including politics. In this case, female politicians use social networks formed through traditional kinship ties to expand their influence and gain legitimacy within a patriarchal society. Thus, they are able to transcend the structural barriers imposed by patriarchy through an approach rooted in local values.

The shift in the political communication patterns of women in Maluku indicates that the patriarchal culture is undergoing a slow but significant adaptation process. The data collected in this study show that, although resistance from male political figures remains strong, female politicians are beginning to gain broader recognition through traditional and collaborative approaches. This adaptive process is also reflected in the changing perceptions of society regarding the role of women in politics, albeit still limited to social issues.

From a social change theory perspective, this phenomenon can be analyzed through Talcott Parsons' perspective on social evolution, which posits that social change is not always revolutionary but often evolutionary, occurring over a prolonged period (Parsons, 2017). In Maluku, this adaptation to patriarchal culture demonstrates that changes in the role of female politicians do not happen dramatically but through a gradual process. Nonetheless, this change is significant as it reflects a shift in the social structure that enables women to become more involved in political decision-making processes.

Social Capital as a Strong Political Asset

The findings of this research highlight one of the prominent strategies used by female politicians in Maluku: the utilization of social capital, in the form of kinship networks and customary relations, to strengthen their political positions. Social capital established through *gandong* (brotherhood among customary groups) and *famili* (extended family) plays a crucial role in supporting female politicians' campaigns, particularly in rural areas where traditional values are deeply ingrained. Female politicians who effectively leverage these social networks often receive wider public support, especially as customary bonds enhance trust and loyalty among individuals and communities.

One interviewed female politician noted, "Here, the *gandong* relationship is very strong. If I can maintain good relations with *families* who share a *gandong* connection with mine, political support becomes easier to obtain. This isn't just political support; it's more about trust and solidarity that's been passed down through generations."

This assertion illustrates how female politicians in Maluku use kinship-based social capital not only for electoral purposes but also to strengthen the trust networks that underlie the social fabric of customary communities. These relationships are used not only in campaigns but also play a vital role in creating peace and resolving local political tensions. Interview data show that female politicians often act as mediators in local conflicts, accessing broader customary groups through these kinship networks.

These findings align with the social capital theory proposed by Robert Putnam (1993), which posits that strong social networks and reciprocal relationships can be valuable political assets. In Maluku's political context, female politicians utilize customary-based social capital to build trust, solidarity, and political support. *Gandong* and *famili* relationships provide not only moral support but also substantial political resources. By building these connections, female politicians not only strengthen their legitimacy among constituents but also gain easier access to political resources, such as votes, financial support, and influential networks.

This use of social capital can also be examined from the sociological perspective advanced by Coleman (1988), who views social capital as a resource embedded in relationships between individuals that can be harnessed to achieve collective goals. In Maluku, female politicians use this social capital to overcome limited access to formal political power. By leveraging customary relationships, they gain the opportunity to play a more significant role in local politics, even within a strongly patriarchal cultural framework.

The data also support Woolcock (1998) argument regarding the role of social capital in development, where strong social networks provide access to more resources and greater opportunities. Woolcock argues that social capital enables individuals and groups to interact across social boundaries, thus facilitating broader collaboration. In the Maluku context, female politicians use customary networks as platforms to communicate with various community groups, whether they have direct or indirect kinship ties. In this way, social capital functions not only as a tool for rallying support but also as a mechanism for cross-group communication and conflict resolution.

However, while social capital provides female politicians with advantages in terms of gathering support and resolving conflicts, they still face structural challenges from patriarchal culture. Customary-based social capital in Maluku remains influenced by patriarchal norms that dictate that women should occupy supportive roles. In interviews, several female politicians acknowledged that although they can utilize social capital to strengthen their political positions, resistance from male politicians and customary figures remains a significant barrier.

A female politician described her experience in this context, saying, "I know customary networks are very helpful, but still, many male figures dominate decision-making. Even though I have good relationships with the community, there are limitations to the roles I can play due to long-established gender norms."

This statement underscores the ambiguity in the use of social capital. On one hand, female politicians can leverage kinship networks to boost their political support. On the other hand, they must still contend with a patriarchal structure that restricts their roles in broader political decision-making processes. This shows that although social capital can be a source of political strength, it has yet to fully overcome the barriers imposed by patriarchy.

From the perspective of political sociology, the utilization of social capital by female politicians in Maluku can be analyzed through Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital as a resource that can be mobilized to gain power and influence within a social structure. Bourdieu argues that social capital, encompassing social networks and reciprocal relationships, enables individuals to obtain greater symbolic and material benefits in society. In this context, female politicians in Maluku use their social capital to gain access to political resources that were previously difficult to reach.

Furthermore, Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (2008) is relevant for understanding how female politicians use social capital not only to operate within existing

structures but also to actively shape and change them. By leveraging customary relationships, they not only adhere to existing social norms but also create space for change, where women can play a more significant role in politics. This indicates that female politicians are not merely subjects of the social structure but also active agents seeking to restructure their roles in local politics.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research reveals that female politicians in Maluku are adept at employing effective political communication strategies by utilizing social capital based on traditional values such as *gandong* (brotherhood) and *famili* (extended family). This strategy strengthens social networks and expands political support, especially within a local context heavily influenced by traditional culture. Collaborative communication, which emphasizes dialogue and harmony over confrontation, characterizes the approach of female politicians in Maluku. However, patriarchal culture remains a primary challenge that hinders women from assuming decision-making roles. Nonetheless, female politicians are gradually breaking down these barriers by integrating progressive traditional values and building strength through their social networks.

As a further effort, raising gender awareness at the community and political levels, along with strengthening social capital through cross-group collaboration, is essential. Political education programs specifically for women in rural areas need to be developed to enhance their capacity in navigating the male-dominated political dynamics. Customary institutions also play an essential role in advocating for gender equality by reforming patriarchal values that restrict women. Additionally, further research on the adaptation of traditional values within a patriarchal context could provide a basis for deepening understanding of social change in Maluku, fostering greater support for women's political participation.

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