

Social Supports and Widows in Churches: An Empirical Assessment in Nigeria Context

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Abstract

The study focused to examine assessment of social supports available for widows in churches, it adopted descriptive research survey method. The population for this study are widows in Seventh-Day Adventist and catholic churches located in Ikenne local government area in Ogun State Nigeria. The sample size was 300 (which is the total number of widows in the seventh day Adventist churches and catholic churches) in Ikenne local government area of Ogun State. From the study it was found that 39.4% agreed that they always received check in phone calls and affection from church members, 3.3% were undecided, while 57.4% disagreed. 38.4% agreed that they had received financial assistance from their churches towards their children education, 2.7% were undecided while 59.0% disagreed. 47.7% agreed that they have gotten advice from the church on how to manage their family alone, 2.7% were undecided while 49.6% disagreed. Therefore it is concluded that these widows in these churches do not actually receive the full social support needed by them from their churches. It was recommended that Church members and pastors should always give counsel and help widows in their churches with the necessary assistance that they need during and after period of their mourning.

Keywords: Knowledge, Perception, Sexual violence, Female students

Introduction

Women are created in the image of God, yet this is hard to believe when one sees the way they are treated in most societies, even by their family members. Abusive relationships abound and violence against women is common within our communities. One particular passage of life is particularly fraught with danger for women: that of becoming a widow. Losing one's partner is traumatic, but this trauma is compounded by the societal and cultural expectations of widows. With the spread of HIV&AIDS widowhood has become even more common, with women becoming widowed at an ever younger age, often also debilitated by the virus (Kapuma, 2011).

Despite the trauma suffered by widows and despite the fact that this status is becoming more common, widowhood remains an issue people are hesitant to speak about. Death and the dead is a topic to be avoided and people are hesitant to address and confront traditional cultural practices (Odudoye, 2001). This hesitancy is also present within higher institutions of theological learning. Ministers are not trained on how to support women who have lost their partners, nor are they shown how to confront cultural practices that discriminate against widows. On the contrary, ministers often do not even see what is wrong with such cultural practices. Thus widows are not supported in their time of need and the church plays no role in helping women to heal (Kapuma, 2011).

The increasing number of widows globally has become an acknowledged social problem in spite of giant strides in medicine and science, death of marriage partners arising from illness/diseases, accidents, wars etc has not been eradicated. In spite of existing cases of widows disinheritance and subjugation to harming widowhood rites in the 21st century, this segment of the population are barely mentioned in the literature of Gender and Development, except in the context of aging. Yet, this is a specific sub-group that should be targeted for intervention in a democratic dispensation considering the incidence of depression among them, the socioeconomic setback that the crisis of widowhood brings to them, and the sudden change in their status (Sesay&Odebiyi, 2007).

We are all aware of the hindu practice of sati (the burning of widows) which is the most extreme form of violence against women and which has now been banned in India. Although it was abolished officially in 1829, despite legislation, sati and violence against women still prevail in some parts of India. Not all widows who follow the tradition do so willingly. In 2002, a 65-year-old widow from Madhya Pradesh died from immolation on her husband's funeral pyre. Authorities suspected that the woman, who had separated from her husband, did not commit sati of her own free will because she did not have good relations with her husband and the grown-up sons did not make any attempt to discourage their mother from sitting on their father's pyre. The husband may have died according to Idialu (2012) but the marriage is deemed to continue. Widows may be forced to drink the water their dead husbands have been washed in; they may be forced to sit with their husband's dead body for days on end. They may be forbidden from washing for several days or even months; be forced to sit naked on a mat and to ritually cry and scream at specific times of the day and night.

They may be forced to undergo life threatening cleansing rites in the misguided belief that “the beauty of a woman is her husband” and when he dies the wife has to be “purified”, in some cases this is because the village may be harmed by the deceased’s ghost. These practices constitute human rights violations and compound the physical and emotional trauma that the death of a loved one already bring (Nnodim, 2012). She is neglected, dejected and isolated. She is not allowed to cook, but food is served to her on a plantain leave as a plate by older widows. On the final day of mourning, she is obliged to move her buttocks on the ground round the celebration yard. This process takes place over a seven week period after which the widow has to wear mourning clothes for one year.

In the Upper East Region of Ghana, the widow is confined for 4 days with a rope around her neck, chest to signify commencement of the rites. The widow is banned from talking to any man and if she does, she will be coerced to marry him when the rite is over. She is however allowed to communicate with all her children, regardless of sex. She is not allowed to eat from the same pot or drink from any family vessel. After 4 days, the widow is bathed with certain herbs amidst singing and drumming. In addition, she is forced to choose to marry any of her late husband's brothers, in accordance with customary requirements. Failure to do so, subjects her to abuse and being labeled a witch, prostitute, or murderer (Krull, 2012).

In some cases the cleansing rites common in Zambia, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania, Ghana, Senegal, Angola, Ivory Coast, Congo and Nigeria, among other countries involve forced sexual contact with a male relative of the husband or a professional cleanser, this in itself can lead to other traumas for the widow who may be infected with HIV/AIDS or even suffer an unwanted pregnancy and increase the pains already felt by the widow in question. In an effort to avoid HIV/AIDS infections, these cleansing rituals have been modified.

According to Sossou, (2002) conflicts across the globe have had a detrimental effect on the development of women’s rights and have largely contributed to the creation of widows. In Kabul, it is estimated that there are about 50,000 widows and in Iraq there are between one to three million widows out of a population of 27 million. Widows are often the target of sexual abuse being deemed “fair game” by soldiers seeking the spoils of war.

Ilozue, (2007) opined that the worst sufferers are the families of the disappeared souls, who run from pillar to post to ascertain the whereabouts of their kin, and in this process, a lot of money get drained and they are rendered as paupers. The half widows cannot remarry as there is no consensus among the scholars of various schools of thoughts as to when a half widow can be declared as widow although the government has declared seven years as the stipulated time, but still widow remarriage rarely takes place as it is alien to the Kashmiri society as well as fear of maltreatment of their children by step father holds many widows back from remarriage. As soon as the woman becomes a half widow, her status in the family is reduced to a maid and in most cases; she is forced to leave the in laws home.

In many cases, the wives were deserted by their husbands’ relatives for not pursuing the cases of their disappeared brothers or fathers. Many members of the victims’ family have lost their mental balance, developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and even some have opted for suicide as a way of escapism from the perpetual agony (Nwadinobi, 2001). Eweluka (2002) noted that the customary law permits and perpetuates discrimination on the basis of gender, especially in family relations. Women experience and suffer marital frustrations and depression. These continue even at the demise of the husband, whereby women face series of dehumanizing treatments from the in-laws, with the claim that, she killed her husband.

Olakitike (2009) expressed that these widowhood practices vary from one place to another and many of these practices violate a woman’s human rights. This is because from time memorial, societies across the globe have been male dominated and still remains so especially in Africa. Hence, Nwosu (2007) opined that the disorganizing and traumatic experience which accompanies death of husbands tends to be greater on women than that of men as a widower. For instance, while the wife immediately becomes the primary suspect for her husband’s death, the man is immediately offered an appropriate substitution to comfort him upon the loss of his wife.

Furthermore, acquisitions of property with a spouse are not recognized under the custom to give the woman any right to any part of the property even when it is proven. The condition of a widow without a male child is better experienced than explained. In many instances, she is a total loser as she does not inherit anything directly or indirectly. This is so because such practices will obviously have adverse impacts on a number of valuable developmental goals. As Albanesi&Olivetti (2007) rightly observed, gender inequality in education and access to resources may have been argued to prevent a reduction of child mortality, of fertility, and an expansion of education of the next generation.

Like most of the developing world, and in particular the West African region, population aging is proceeding at a rapid pace in Nigeria and as a result sizable segments of the population will encounter widowhood in the coming decades (Fuludu, 2005). A widow not properly supported and adjusted is not only having problem, but could be a problem to herself, her family and the society as a whole. Many widows, especially those at the lowest rung of socio-economic ladder (the poor and illiterates) rely on their children and relatives for support, while co-residence provides support for the middle-aged and younger widows. Young

Christians and Muslims widows receive greater percentage of support than older widows and those of other religions (Agumagu, 2007).

According to Fasoranti&Aruna(2007) economic, social and emotional supports are given to most widows mainly by their friends, siblings and husbands' friends. The levirate system of support enjoyed by widows of old has been recently criticized as a ploy to sexually exploit widows, especially the younger and beautiful ones. Encyclopedia of Death and Dying (2008) in buttressing the argument reported that widows in many African societies impregnated by the male relatives in the levirate culture were often deserted and thrown out of the family homestead. In societies where social securities are nonexistence or poorly coordinated widows seem to depend on other support and adjustment systems made available by nature or tradition. A widow (especially the poor ones) needs support to maintain a life style, and such supports could be grouped into economic social service or emotional support.

Eweluka(2002) in a study believe that any support given to a widow is to restore her confidence and improve her sense of belonging to the society, and can often be accomplished through close and intimate relationship between the widow and significant others in her life. Thus, it was against this premise that this study investigated social support available for widows in Nigeria, a study of selected Christian Denominations in Ogun state, Nigeria.

The research aimed to answer the following questions;

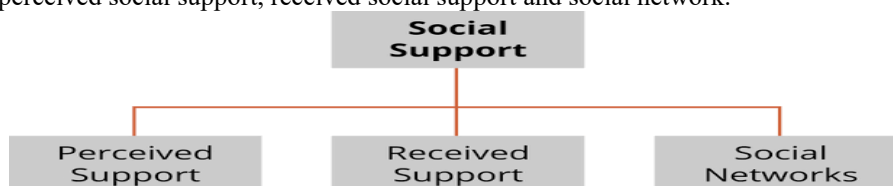
1. What are the emotional supports available for widows in churches?
2. What are the tangible supports available for widows in churches?
3. What are the informational supports available for widows in churches?

Theoretical Framework

The researcher finds it convenient to note that theories that deal with people and their interaction in the society especially regarding demise of a loved one are relevant to this project.

The Social Support Theory

The social support theory state that the following social supports has an effect on an individual of which widows are included: perceived social support, received social support and social network.



Social Support

Social support is a medium of exchange of resources between two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended for the enhancement and well-being of the recipient which effects may be positive, negative, or neutral. In the social science community, the recognition that social relationships are essential to personal health, happiness, friends, are good medicine is a saying that has an atom of reality in the life of the individual and particularly the widows. Social support for widows if present and very accessible will go a long way in having a positive impact on widows since most times they are in helpless states which are mostly as a result of traditional rights and sometimes poverty. Social support refers to the function and quality of social relationships, such as perceived availability of help or support actually received.

Relevance of this Theory to the Study

The effect of social support on the wellbeing of widows is the fact that social support is assumed to be an important factor following loss of a dear one: support after the death is both instrumental and emotional. Families provided instrumental support after the deaths by offering money, helping with chores and maintenance, serving as liaisons, and simply being available as needs arose. Neighbors provided on-call support after the deaths: checking in on the widows, being emergency contacts, even taking care of things before the widows ask for help. Emotional support was clearly evident after the deaths.(Nnodim, 2012).Families provided emotional support after the deaths through their companionship, check-in phone calls, and affection. The adjustment to widowhood is a complex experience; many of the themes identified in the interviews were similar to those documented in the research on resilience. The social support themes were particularly interesting. Widows' descriptions of their sources of social support (families, friends, neighbors) mirrored the literature on these topic .Their descriptions of the nature and quality of social support, however, provided novel perspective on this protective mechanism.

According to Glanz, Rimer& Lewis (2002)at least two people are always involved in a supportive exchange.

Perceived support is those resources that one believes are available at any point in time. Social support theory suggests that higher perceived social support has more positive influences on health behaviors and practices (Uchino, 2004). There will be distinct perceptions of the exchange that may not converge. Almost all measures of support, and also of social relationships and networks, have relied on the self-report of the focal person (recipient) about how others behave or how the focal person perceives their behavior.

The process of giving and receiving is more fluid than is implied by economic modeling, however, and the imposition of exchange concepts can trivialize the phenomenon by reducing mutual caring to a cost/benefit analysis. The reciprocity model implies that the nurturance we offer one another is quantifiable and that, on some level, a value is fixed to the resource. In reality it is difficult to fix value to what is gained by providing assistance to someone cared for. In order to minimize the negative effects of reciprocity, providers can be sensitized to the recipients' needs to feel they are contributing equitably to the relationship. Also recipients might be encouraged to assist someone other than the provider.

The relevance of this theory to the study is that most widows were satisfied with the support they received. Some widows provided nuance suggesting that social support is a complex experience. Widows were able to detect mismatches between the support available and their needs, as in situations in which more support was offered than they wanted or when they felt uncomfortable using the support offered. A social network represents a web of relationships that encircles an individual together with network characteristics, such as range or size (number of members), density (degree of interconnection), boundedness (extent of closeness such as kin, workplace, neighborhood), and homogeneity (Blieszner, 2014). The strength of a widow's social network can either put her at an advantaged or disadvantaged position. Conceptually social networks represent the objective basis for social integration and social support because social networks are the number of people or possible support providers in an individual's environment. People can be predisposed to illness by long-term social isolation, neglect, loneliness, and social stress. In the case of conjugal loss, for example, widows are particularly at risk of illness and premature death if they lack a compensating network of support providers. A more comprehensive way to assess these constructs is a social network index that also includes the number of roles one assumes in the family and in organizations, such as church, as well as the frequency of contact to other members of such groups.

In studying the relative contribution of the various conditions to bereavement outcomes in relevance of this theory to the study, the effects severed widowhood in Nigeria as rooted in cultural and traditional practices as well as the socialization processes that conditioned widows to passivity and dependence (Collins, Jaremka & Kane, 2014).

Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive survey research design that was used to assess social support available for widows in churches in Ikenne local government area of Ogun State, Nigeria.

Participants

Widows in Seventh – Day Adventist churches and catholic churches located in Ikenne local government area were purposively selected from widows in Ogun State for this study due to proximity to the researcher. The population for this study consisted of 300 widows (which is the total number of widows in the seventh day Adventist churches and catholic churches) in Ikenne local government area of Ogun State.

Measures

The research instrument employed for this study is a well-structured questionnaire, designed by the researcher to elicit responses from the respondents concerning social support available for widows in churches in Ikenne local government area using five likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (SA) Agree (A) Undecided (UN) Strongly Disagree (SD) Disagree (D). The questionnaire was divided into four sections.

Section A- explored demographic characteristics of respondent such as age, years of widowhood, employment and salary earned by the widows.

Section B- examined emotional support available for widows in churches.

Section C- examined tangible support available for widows in churches.

Section D- examined informational support available for widows in churches.

Procedures

The questionnaire was administered to widows in the selected churches. The population for this study is widows in Seventh–Day Adventist and catholic churches located in Ikenne local government area in Ogun State Nigeria. The instrument employed for this study was a well - structured questionnaire which was used to get the required information from the respondents. The primary sources of data were basically through administration of questionnaires. A total of 300 questionnaires were administered.

The data collected was presented and analyzed using simple frequency tables and percentages. Simple frequency tables were used in presenting the number of questionnaire administered as well as those collected and utilized in the analysis. Thereafter, the computer software-Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used in analyzing the data. Items in the questionnaire were grouped appropriately based on the feedbacks given by the respondents and coded for easy usage of the statistical package for social sciences

Result

Research question 1

What are the emotional support available for widows in churches?

Table 1: Emotional supports available for respondents

Variable	SA F	%	A F	%	UN F	%	D F	%	SD F	%
I feel that there is no one in my church I can share my most private worries and fears with.	61	20.3	27	9.0	6	2.0	73	24.3	133	44.3
I was allowed to express or talk about my loss.	78	26.0	49	16.3	1	0.3	85	28.3	87	29.0
I always received check in phone calls and affection from church members.	53	17.7	65	21.7	10	3.3	107	35.7	65	21.7
I don't often get invited to do things with others in my church.	57	19.0	106	35.3	12	4.0	83	27.7	42	14.0
There is a well organized widows group in my church	34	11.3	59	19.7	39	13.0	117	39.0	51	17.0
The pastor's sermon was encouraging	44	14.7	72	24.0	22	7.3	98	32.7	64	21.3
When I feel lonely, there are several people I can talk to in my church.	38	12.7	60	20.0	14	4.7	92	30.7	96	32.0
My church administration has been very supportive since the death of my husband	54	18.0	60	20.0	21	7.0	86	28.7	79	26.3

Source: Research Field Survey, 2017

Table 1 revealed that 29.3% agreed with the statement that there is no one in their church that they can share their most private worries and fears with, 2.0% were undecided while 68.6% disagreed with the statement. 42.3% agreed that they were allowed to express or talk about their loss, 0.3% were undecided, while 57.3% disagreed. 39.4% agreed that they always received check in phone calls and affection from church members, 3.3% were undecided, while 57.4% disagreed. 54.3% agreed that they don't often get invited to do things with others in their churches, 4.0% were undecided, while 41.7% disagreed. 31.0% agreed with that there is a well organized widows group in their churches, 13.0% were undecided, while 56.0% disagreed. 38.7% agreed that the pastor's sermon was encouraging, 7.3% were undecided while 54.0% disagreed. 32.7% agreed that when they feel lonely, there are several people they can talk to in their churches, 4.7% were undecided while 62.7% disagreed. 38.0% agreed that their church administration had been very supportive since the death of their husbands, 7.0% were undecided while 55.0% disagreed. From the above table it can be deduce that widows in these churches do not get the emotional support that they need from their churches.

Research question 2

What are the tangible support available for widows in churches?

TABLE 2: Tangible supports available for respondents

Variable	SA F	%	A F	%	UN F	%	D F	%	SD F	%
I have church members who come around to help me with house chores	91	30.3	21	7.0	0	0	38	12.7	150	50.0
I know someone in church who could watch my kids for me if I want to step out	115	38.3	41	13.7	2	0.7	68	22.7	74	24.7
My church members are available whenever needed	79	26.3	90	30.0	10	3.3	70	23.3	51	17.0
My husband's death has made church members closer to me	88	29.3	48	16.0	4	1.3	70	23.3	90	30.0
I still receive gifts/foodstuff from the church	54	18.0	92	30.7	27	9.0	66	22.0	61	20.3
I have received financial assistance from my church towards my children education	53	17.7	62	20.7	8	2.7	103	34.3	74	24.7

Source: Researches Field Survey, 2017

From table 2 above, 37.3% agreed that they have church members who come around to help them with house chores, while 62.7% disagreed. 52.0% agreed that they know someone in church who could watch their kids for them if they want to step out, 0.7% were undecided while 47.4% disagreed. 56.3% agreed that their church members are available whenever needed, 3.3% were undecided while 40.3% disagreed. 45.3% agreed that their husband's death had made church members closer to them, 1.3% were undecided while 53.3% disagreed. 48.7% agreed that they still receive gifts/foodstuff from the church, 9.0% were undecided while 42.3% disagreed. 38.4% agreed that they have received financial assistance from their churches towards their children education, 2.7% were undecided while 59.0% disagreed. From the above table it can be deduce that widows in these churches do receive partial tangible support from their churches.

Research question 3

What are the informational support available for widows in churches?

Table 3: Informational supports available for respondents

Variable	SA F	%	A F	%	UN F	%	D F	%	SD F	%
I get counsel from my church pastor most times	63	21.0	89	29.7	12	4.0	82	27.3	54	18.0
I have people in the church who link me with agencies with essential services for widows	61	20.3	71	23.7	16	5.3	89	29.7	63	21.0
I have older members of my church who assists me with advice	29	9.7	74	24.7	45	15.0	98	32.7	54	18.0
My church members are helpful with suggestions	43	14.3	95	31.7	29	9.7	74	24.7	59	19.7
I have received help on how to cope with stress from my church members	76	25.3	31	10.3	2	0.7	100	33.3	91	30.3
I have gotten advice from church leaders on how to manage my family alone	56	18.7	87	29.0	8	2.7	103	34.3	46	15.3

Source: Research Field Survey, 2017

From table 3 above, 50.7% agreed that they get counsel from their church pastors most times, 4.0% were undecided while 45.3% disagreed. 44.0% agreed that they have people in the church who link them to agencies with essential services for widows, 5.3% were undecided while 50.7% disagreed. 34.4% agreed that they have older members of their churches that assists them with advice, 15.0% were undecided while 50.7% disagreed. 46.0% agreed that their church members are helpful with suggestions, 9.7% were undecided while 44.4% disagreed. 35.6% agreed that they have received help on how to cope with stress from their church members, 0.7% were undecided while 63.6% disagreed. 47.7% agreed that they have gotten advice from the church on how to manage their family alone, 2.7% were undecided while 49.6% disagreed. It can be deduce from the above table that these widows do not get the full informational supports that they need from their churches.

Discussion of Findings

According to research question one on emotional support from widows, it was discovered that the widows had no emotional support that they needed from their churches, this correspond with what Kapuma (2011) wrote in her book widowhood a story of pain, that even fellow male ministers in her church do not feel comfortable in her presence, that people have a feeling that married people can talk freely but as a widow you are avoided. This made her feel isolated most times.

It was also found that majority of the widows disagreed with the statement that when they feel lonely, there are several people they can talk to in their churches, which correspond with the findings of Mpiyakhe (2011) who found out that most clergy widows do not receive the emotional support needed even during period of mourning.

From research question two, it was found that widows in churches do not receive full tangible support from their churches which correspond with the findings of Kapuma (2011), which states that the churches do not address the financial issues that plague the widows during and after their husband burial. According to Mpiyakhe (2011) there seemed to be a gross neglect of the clergy widows, which in itself is not only shameful but an act that apparently denies the brotherly love which the scriptures speak about even as Christ states: "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

It was also found from the study that 50.7% of the widows get counsel from their pastor and this correspond with Doehring statement that the widow can, find solace in the knowledge that although human counsellors are around to encourage, there is an even better one who provides the ultimate healing, namely God whose kingdom we are encouraged to seek. The position of the widow is no different from the picture drawn by Doehring's citation of Neville. It is the position of broken hope which requires meticulous care as she attempts to purge

together the fractured pieces of hope. (Doehring, 2006:119).

This counselling is viewed as such by Clinebell where he state: "Pastoral counselling is an essential means by which a church is helped to be a lifesaving station and not a club, a hospital and a garden of the spiritual life-not a museum" (Clinebell 1966:14). The result of the study shows that 54.3% agreed that they don't often get invited to do things with others in their churches, which reflect that majority of them do not socialize maximally. According to Adewole (2012) widows would socialized according to their ability to overcome limiting sense of self projected to them through their socio-acceptance factors; and the satisfaction of their basic needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness.

The findings in Azhar, Nadeem, Naz, Perveen & Sameen (2013) have been overtaken in relation to this study. These studies showed that low economic status affects widows' relationship and wellbeing in a negative way. The same conclusion was also reached in Nickelson (2017).

The postulation in Juvonen, Espinoza & Knifsend (2012); all showed that the effect of social support on the wellbeing of widows have contributions on the widows condition. Thus the differences in effect of social support on the wellbeing of widows and their ability to navigate the wellbeing determine the outcome of the social support of the widows. The levels of wellbeing (output) of widows are determined by the type of inputs the widows brought into the church and environment and how such input aligns with such social support. The result from this study also brought more understanding to previous studies in Massimilano & Prue (2009), Nickelson (2017).

Conclusion

The problem that arises from the background provided above highlights whether the widows are given the care, treatment and protection they should be enjoying from the ecclesiastical bodies in which they fellowship. Hightower entrusts the responsibility of the care upon every believer in the following way: "The ministry of the Church is shared by all who name Jesus as Lord. This doctrinal view is called the priesthood of all believers. We both have direct access to God and we are called to function as priests before God. A part of the priestly task is to care for all persons (Avison & Cuthbertson, 2002). Pastoral ministry (caring for folks from birth to death) is more than a function for ordained clergy; it is every Christian's task" (Hightower 1999:177).

Recommendation

From the findings of the study, there are some recommendations to be made.

1. It is very essential for churches to support widows in order for them to enjoy emotional wellbeing which translates to their overall wellbeing.
2. There is a need for churches to give tangible support to widows such as basic needs like food, shelter, and clothing amongst others. This tangible support transcends to good feeding patterns, such widows should have access to three square meals daily to increase their longevity.
3. Church members and pastors should always give counsel and help widows in their churches with the necessary assistance that they need.
4. Finally widows should not be neglected but should be given adequate love, care and protection from churches as a way of covering their nakedness. This support will give such widows a proper sense of belonging within the society of existence.

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