

ASSESSING GENDER EQUALITY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality is a fundamental requirement for a progressive 21st century society and economy; yet, South Africa still grapples with challenges affecting the attainment of equality across genders, 25 years after our first Freedom Day. It should be noted, however, that this contemporary era has seen robust approaches taken to uplift previously disadvantaged persons, such as women, in employment and other spectrums of life. Modern day South Africa was borne out of historical inequalities that were based in racially-biased policies and practices. Coupled with ancient beliefs that have left a residue of patriarchal opinions on gender equality, the pre-1994 era has caused South Africa to face imbalances that need redressing. Historical factors have also placed South Africa at loggerheads with global developments related to male-domination of workplaces and societies, something that requires urgent intervention in South Africa. In this article, gender equality in the South African public services sector is analysed through the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA). As the custodian of public service polices, the DPSA has adopted and implemented the Strategic Framework on Gender Equality within the Public Service as its gender equality compass and barometer. This article analyses gender equality informed by the tenets of the said Framework as a conduit for building and sustaining a non-racial, non-sexist, and equal modern South Africa. The recommendations of the article include an intensified and fully-fledge public service practice pertaining to gender equality, as well as improved upward mobility for women in top management positions. Such improvement includes mobility resulting from recruitment and promotion augmented by normal processes such as political appointments.

Key words: gender, gender equality, recruitment, promotion, public service, DPSA, women empowerment

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women and men both occupy various occupations within private sector organisations as well as in public service entities that come with varying levels of authority, decision-making, and responsibility. However, there is currently an absence of equality in employment and opportunities in modern day workplaces, whether in the public or private sector, which is testament to a web of factors affecting gender equality. Of primary importance is the recognition that “some gender inequalities are rooted in deeply held societal beliefs about gendered capabilities and skills and about women’s and men’s roles in society” (Eikhof, 2012). While these beliefs are subjective, they still have a significant influence on the prevailing attitudes in workplaces regarding occupations that are ‘more suitable’ to and/or for women or men. As Stamarski and Son Hing (2015) note, “workplace discrimination negatively affects women’s earnings and opportunities are the gender wage gap; the dearth of women in leadership; and the longer time required for women (vs. men) to advance in their careers. In other words, workplace discrimination contributes to women’s lower socio-economic status”. Furthermore, the interventions designed to provide equal opportunities to and treatment between men and women are still evolving, and gender equality currently remains an aspiration, not a reality. This is despite a growingly avid stance towards gender equality that has been articulated in various policy blueprints, including the *Strategic Framework on Gender Equality within the Public Service* (2005) (herein referred to as a Framework). Hence, both policy and practice must intensify the drive towards *real* gender equality, as opposed to the implementation of the superficial inclusion of women within the ranks of an organisation. This article adopts a Gender and Development (GAD) approach as a theoretical framework. The GAD, according to March, Ines, and Mukhopadhyay (1999 in Kithatu-Kiwekete & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2017), addresses inequalities in women’s and men’s social role in relation to development. This approach argues for an integrated gender planning perspective that concentrates on the power relations between men and women to challenge the assumptions between traditional planning methods. Qualitative research methods were utilized in order to obtain data relevant to the scope of the article. Snape and Spencer (2003 in Ncamphalala & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2019) emphasize that qualitative research methods depend upon a range of factors, including: the researcher’s beliefs (ontology) about the nature of the social world and what can be known about it; the nature of knowledge and how knowledge can be acquired (the researcher’s

epistemology); and the researcher's purpose(s) and aims for the research. Using a qualitative research approach, the author conducted a literature review, document analysis, and desktop analysis as a means to assess the implementation of the Framework via the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA). This approach and its focus on the DPSA were adopted since the DPSA is the custodian of the Framework. It was prudent, then, to gain an understanding of whether the DPSA is fulfilling the core objectives of the Framework by incorporating gender equality in its internal organisational structures and processes. As a first step for the South African public sector, the compliance and implementation of gender equality within public services could be used to draw inferences on sector-wide practices.

2. GENDER EQUALITY: AN OVERVIEW

Gender, according to Ghosh (2015), can be defined as “one's own identification as male, female, or intersex; gender may also be based on legal status, social interactions, public persona, personal experiences, and psychological setting”. Based on this definition, it could be argued that instead of following a stereotypical mentality, gender should be determined by the ability and competence of individuals in respect to performing tasks and responsibilities attributed to men and women in society and the workplace. In order to evade gender-based discrimination on personal, societal, and professional fronts, the preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) calls for a republic that is non-sexist, non-racial, and equal. Gender equality is, thus, one of the benchmarks that can be used to determine whether or not the Constitution is being upheld. According to Vyas-Doorgapersad (2015), gender equality reflects a situation where women and men have equal conditions for realising their full human rights and potential, and underlying causes of discrimination are systematically identified and removed. In a bid to ascertain full gender equality, this current article wholly concurs with the argument raised by Vyas-Doorgapersad (2018), namely that, “gender equality is an equally critical, fundamental ‘human right’”. In determining the diverse spectrums under which gender equality can be measured, it is necessary to assess gender gaps within the workplace that are linked to position, power, money, opportunity, responsibility, and authority. Verniers and Vala (2018) add that “recruitment, promotion and job assignment”, should also be taken into consideration. This gender equality matrix implies that gender equality is all-encompassing; thus, women emancipation or empowerment has to focus on various aspects of daily life and should avoid a myopic view confined to one aspect, which is usually related to either economic

participation or employment. The assessment of gender equality is important, as gender gaps can create an environment of gender-based discrimination. The prevalence of discrimination, either as societal views or institutional processes, prevent women from achieving their full potential as productive members of society because these result in women's unequal access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and participation in governance and politics (Falola, 2013). Such gaps can also hinder women's access to decision-making positions in public services. Such hinderances have been substantiated by a Department of Labour (DoL, 2018) report, which highlighted that women are currently under-represented at the senior management service (SMS) level in relation to their Economically Active Population (EAP), while men continue to dominate at that level. Nhlapo (2020) adds that the South African public service sector has more women than men across all racial groups and this is very similar to the national demographics. The situation starts changing when it comes to representation of women at SMS or their representation amongst employees with disabilities. The public service is still male dominated at the decision-making level. It is, therefore, important to assess what [is] being done in the public service to change the historically patriarchal work environment to one that [is] conducive to the employment, retention and empowerment of women for gender equality (Nhlapo & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2016). A key finding obtained from the literature discussed so far is that there is no common understanding of what constitutes 'gender mainstreaming' within the public services sector. Gender mainstreaming "is the process of assessing the implications for women and men respectively in any planned action including legislation, policies and programmes in any area and at all levels" (in Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2016). The Public Service Commission (PSC, 2006) confirms that there is a lack of awareness of gender mainstreaming and its terms and processes as well as a lack of knowledge regarding gender mainstreaming across all levels in most departments. Additionally, the Commission found that equity targets fall short of advancing gender empowerment, and that there is a lack of gender expertise and gender focal points for gender-based inclusion in decision-making portfolios (PSC, 2006). The information stated in previous sections highlight that this situation still exists in DPSA and other public services, hence require attention for improvement.

3. A SYNOPSIS OF THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK ON GENDER EQUALITY

The assessment of gender equality in the South African public services sector is premised on opportunities for empowerment. The DPSA initiated its Framework

with the intended aim to ‘gender-mainstream’ human resource (HR) practices within the public services sector. The assessment of the Framework and gender equality in this field important in determining the level of equality between genders in order to ensure the attainment of individual developmental goals; seamless access to socio-economic opportunities; and the emancipation of groups that have previously been affected by unfairness. In the context of this article, gender equality is assessed across various spectrums or themes, including political appointments, promotions, and mainstream employment; all of which give effect to reducing gaps between men and women, marked improvement in women’s capabilities, access to opportunities, and personal development for women in society. The Framework has been set against the backdrop of the great need for interventions targeting the redressing of past imbalances in gender parity within South Africa’s public services. It should be noted that the Framework is not only focussed on redressing past imbalances, but addresses the global challenge of the proverbial ‘glass ceiling’, as seen in the absence or institutionalised lack of upward mobility of women in contrast to their male counterparts. Overall, the Framework is aligned with Millennium Development Goal Three, which has been refocussed as the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-5), and which highlights the need to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (UN, 2015). From its inception in 2005, the principal objective of the Framework, according to Bangani (2019), has been to offer a “strategy geared towards increasing the number of women at all levels of the Senior Management Service (SMS) [that] include the element of empowerment, development and leadership of all women”. This strategy can be achieved, as asserted by the DPSA (2006), through focus on increasing women’s participation in decision-making, and the concomitant adoption of the public service employment equity target of 50% representation for women at all levels of the SMS. Hence, both these aspects have been built into the current strategy. Concerted effort is, thus, needed across all governmental departments – at national, provincial, and local levels – in order to effectively address women’s empowerment and leadership development. In the process of pursuing its bold strategy, the Framework provides a wide set of options for the transformation of the workplace premised on the promotion and protection of human dignity and the rights of women. It recognises the role of the government in promoting non-sexism and non-discrimination for employees in the public service (Bangani & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020). This strategy encompasses, *inter alia*, non-sexism as stipulated in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996). The Framework is also centred on developing competent women who can equally realise upward mobility within a well-crafted legal and policy environment, both as an antidote to redressing historical

imbalances and in confronting the global challenge of women reaching the glass ceiling. In this regard, the analysis of gender equality in the South African public services sector has been centred on the overall aim and guiding principles of the Framework, which details women empowerment, emancipation, and upward mobility; affirmative action; and the skills development of women public servants. In the forthcoming section, the article assesses gender equality in the South African public services sector by using the DPSA as a custodian of the Framework.

4. GENDER EQUALITY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICES SECTOR

The DPSA's gender equality barometer is assessed and analysed in the current section of this article. The aim was to assess how the department designs and implements practices that are aligned with the prescripts contained in various policies and statutes giving effect to a democratic developmental state. These prescripts include, amongst others, the important aspect of building an inclusive and gender-equal public services sector, as guided by the Framework. As the custodian of the Framework, the DPSA's gender equality processes and implementations have been assessed under various factors, including its recruitment practices, employment equity, and promotions processes. These factors have then been assessed in relation to the South African public services sector as a whole in order to view the situation within its broader context.

4.1 Recruitment processes as a measure of gender equality in public services:

For Russell and Brannan (2016:120), the process of recruitment seeks to find and attract capable applicants for employment in vacant positions in an organisation. The process of recruitment has some common pitfalls, which include recruitment discrimination, and/or the arbitrary side-lining of qualifying or competent job applicants. From a social-psychological perspective, recruitment discrimination can be defined as a reduced likelihood of being offered a job or job interview following the submission of a job application to an advertised job vacancy if or when an applicant's association to a negatively stereotyped group is revealed in the application (Liebkind, Larja, & Brylka, 2016). It is important to note that recruitment discrimination that acts against the steadfast State efforts to attain proportional gender presentation is outlawed in South Africa. For example, statutorily, Section 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) outlaws any kind of unfair discrimination based on any arbitrary characteristics of certain persons. Hence, the DPSA as well as the larger public services sector are

obliged to adhere to relevant Acts and to fully implement the Framework in order to bring objectivity into their recruitment processes. The analysis presented in this article of the DPSA's recruitment processes for the 2018/19 fiscal year shows a trend that is indicative of male-domination in terms of new entrants. Statistically, data obtained from the DPSA Annual Report (2018/19) shows a discouraging gender distribution, whereby the top management positions within the DPSA were held 100% by men (two appointments), and skilled and semi-skilled positions were filled with 11 men and 17 women. While these statistics indicate that there were more women recruits in the semi-skilled employees' category, the decision-making positions reported more men being appointed. It may be possible to argue that there is a current scarcity of skills amongst women job applicants; however, these statistics and distribution show that the DPSA still has a substantial amount of work to do in terms of attaining gender equality through recruitment, especially in relation to the top/strategic levels of its hierarchy. This situation is similar in the greater public services sector, where many departments are failing to meet the aims of the Framework, namely "to achieve the equity target of 50% women at all levels of SMS" (DPSA, 2006). As cited by Bangani and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2020), the 50% target can only be achieved by 2025, if the pace does not change.

4.2 Employment equity as a benchmark of gender equality in public services:

Employment equity can be defined as, making available positions to all sections of society. It is therefore about placing employees with the right skills in the right positions at the right time, thereby ensuring that the predetermined goals of the organisation are met and effectively and efficiently achieved (Auriacombe & Jarbandhan, 2016). This understanding of employment equity also succinctly refers to statutory interventions aimed at bringing about equality in both private and public sector workplaces. The guiding law for the establishment of workplace equity in South Africa is the Employment Equity Act (55 of 1998). The statistics gathered and presented in this article from the DPSA's 2018/19 Annual Report show that out of 420 employees, the DPSA's top management portfolios, such as Legislators, Senior Officials and Managers (levels 13-16), are occupied by 54 men and 37 women. The technical category of jobs (levels 6-8) are occupied by 59 women and 24 men. Portfolios such as entry level clerks, who also hold elementary occupations; as well as occupation-specific dispensations are occupied by 53 women and 50 men. These findings indicate that men are concentrated in the top job echelons, while women are concentrated in the semi- and unskilled labour bands. These discrepancies in gender distribution across the various occupation levels has been argued in an earlier section of this article, which analysed the recruitment processes of the DPSA, and is similar in the greater

public services sector, where unequal recruitment has not changed in years. Within the public services sector in 2015, the majority of employees who held top management level positions were men, and these employees had almost four times more representation than their women counterparts (Commission for Employment Equity (CEE), 2015). Similarly, more than two thirds of employees who held senior management positions in 2016 and 2017 were men (CEE, 2016; CEE, 2017), and 76.5% of all top management level employees in 2018 were men (Merten 2019:2). Conversely, women's representation at the top management level was approximately half their EAP in 2019 (CEE, 2019). Section 195(1)(I) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), clearly stipulates that public administration must be broadly representative of the South African people, with employment and personnel management practices based on ability, objectivity, fairness and the need to redress the imbalances of the past to achieve broad representation. Therefore, the building of universal equity is necessary in order for workplaces to be reflective of the various racial groups found in South African society.

4.3 Promotion processes as a yardstick of gender equality in public services:

Promotion is an aspect of HR that is also responsible for implementing diversity management strategies in the public services sector. The strategy of promotion is based on the "government's national priority areas, and is, therefore, built on the approach taken to integrate gender, disability, employment equity, and transformation interventions into the day-to-day work of public service. The goal of promotion is to create an open, fair, and participatory work environment that is based on human dignity, freedom, and equality" (DPSA, 2009). In the context of the DPSA, promotion, as a strategy, only offers increased equality of opportunities for women in the lower ranks. Apart from the political appointees occupying the top five positions, normal internal upward mobility, through the DPSA's process of promotion, has led to gender equality, or, more precisely, to women emancipation. However, such equality is only evident at the skilled and semi-skilled levels, and/or in the discretionary decision-making employment band. According to the PSC (2006), recruitment and promotion in the South African public services sector takes place according to employment equity targets as informed by the employment equity plans. Women feel disadvantaged from the onset because they have practical needs that influence their ability to apply for certain jobs. These noted issues create gender exclusion, which operates against the intended norm of the Framework. The Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG, 2015) similarly reports that the representation of women in public services is low, and "targets of 50% female employment are not met". Mr Mashwahle

Diphofa, Director General of the DPSA (PMG, 2015) also highlighted that “only 28% of senior managers on level 16 were women, versus 72% for men”. The People’s Assembly (2016) further detailed that Gauteng has the most (44.7%) female representation at senior management level, while the North West (36.1%), Mpumalanga (36%), Northern Cape (35.7%) and the Free State (34%) are struggling to meet the 50% target. National departments are at 41.5% female senior level representation. In addition, “...of the 156 departments (national and provincial), only 21 (13%) meet the 50% senior female representation target, while 23 departments sit below 30% senior female representation” (People’s Assembly, 2016). The latest report by West (2019) states, professional women inch forward in the fight for gender equality [where] 39% of senior management is female...[this] may be interpreted as positive signs of a changing landscape, the overall environment of still far from ideal.

The South African government has, therefore, made inroads in ensuring that employment equity practices are aligned with efforts to, *inter alia*, achieve gender equality. One such intervention has been the establishment of the CEE in 1999, which explores gender equality resulting from promotion and recruitment drives. The CEE, established in terms of Section 28 of the Employment Equity Act (55 of 1998) has various duties, which encompass, amongst others, advising the Minister of Labour on the setting of numerical employment equity goals in different sectors (Steyn, 2014). Despite employment equity interventions existing for many years, as well as the indicators from the DPSA, more effort still needs to be exerted, especially in relation to equality as seen in historically disadvantaged individuals (HDIs) occupying top positions in public entities. The previously presented data highlight a need for additional interventions in order to attain gender equality in the DPSA and the South African public services sector as a whole. These interventions could be augmented by the promotion of more women, especially in leadership and decision-making positions. Arguably, the emancipation of women is not only confined to entry-level recruitment but internal organisational processes as well. Such processes are crucial indicators of the upward mobility of women and HDIs. It is important, therefore, for the public services sector to champion HR policies and practices aimed towards ensuring that women have equal opportunities for promotion when compared to men; thereby ensuring that public organisation or entities embrace inclusivity, which, in turn, can have a positive effect on productivity.

5. SYNTHESIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The article analysed and assessed gender equality in the DPSA and the South African public services sector as a whole. Based on the findings, this article advocates for the public service-wide implementation of the Framework through recruitment, promotion, and the implementation of employment equity. Recent political appointments have had a significant influence in the realisation of gender equality in public services, which is an encouraging sign of the practical approach currently being taken by the executive branch of Government to attain an equal representation of women and men in public entities. There is also a correlation between the upward mobility of women and the skill levels of job occupants. This correlation implies that the skills and proficiency capacities of women can have a direct impact on their employment and promotion. South Africa has a long history of patriarchy, which affects, amongst many other aspects, the skills capacity of women.

This article regards this skewed pattern of skills capacities across the genders as troubling, especially given that upward mobility linked to skills is the largest contributor to women empowerment or emancipation and, ultimately, gender equality. The consequences of non-compliance to statutory requirements for women quotas and empowerment should be dire in order to enforce compliance. While it could be expected that the existence of a rich statutory-, policy-, and regulatory-based framework on gender equity would be enough to accelerate women empowerment, some passive resistance related to the Framework has made such desired progress an arduous journey. As a recommendation, this article asserts that the various oversight roles of such structures as the CGE should be empowered to include hefty sanctions for those caught stifling gender equality efforts. Another key finding presented in this article was that there is a need for synergy throughout the public services sector. This need stems from the necessity for the DPSA, as well as all public service entities and other stakeholders, to ensure that its policies and laws on gender equality are implemented in a sustainable fashion. SDG-5 emphasises gender equality, while the preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) calls for a non-sexist society; such alignment between local and international documentation is indicative of how South Africa is a key player in the fight for gender equality. Although current gender equality trends in South Africa are evidence of a society that is gradually escaping the shackles of patriarchy and sexist practices, more needs to be done to promote best practices, as seen in this article's analysis of the gender equality efforts made by the Public services sector in general, and the DPSA in particular.

The analysis and assessment of gender equality in public services have also revealed various challenges that confront efforts towards attaining the equal representation of women and men in employment.

The article also provides additional recommendations aimed at realising the goals of the Framework within the public services sector. Specifically, there is a need to enforce the compliance of public service entities with various laws and regulations, include affirmative action and employment. There is also need to stiffen the consequences of non-compliance with the requirements of these regulations. Furthermore, capacity building should target women and other groups within the HDIs in order to ensure that women empowerment is all-inclusive, as well as to remove the glass ceiling. The training and development of women are essential for ensuring that they penetrate male dominated levels of decision-making in organisations. Currently, capacity building programmes are stipulated in the Skills Development Act (97 of 1998) that suggests the need for an organisational framework accommodating workplace programmes, policies, and strategies (Machika, 2014). In the context of this article, calls for gender equality in the recruitment, promotion, and other processes of the DPSA and the South African public services sector in general should be tied to the capacity building of recruits and appointees.

A strong emphasis on capacity building is based on the need to ensure that while the redressing of existing past imbalances through women (and HDIs) empowerment and emancipation, critical aspects such as productivity and public service rendering are not negatively affected. Moreover, gender equality and employment equity initiatives and interventions should not be viewed as loopholes through which less productive, incompetent, and/or less-qualified individuals gain employment within public services. In order to avoid such potentially detrimental practices, it is necessary to emphasise and implement consistent skills development, meritorious recruitment, and employee development so as to build and sustain a productive public services sector. By extension, in a bid to comply with the Framework, the DPSA and other public services departments need to ensure that their capacity building initiatives, such as employee training and development, are gender conscious so as to accord all points of the gender spectrum an equal opportunity to acquire job-specific skills and training.

The article argues that the upward mobility of women within the DPSA and the South African public services sector, as a whole, should be strongly linked to

skills, merit, and competencies as opposed to biased interventions that fail to take cognisance of the need for productivity and effect public service delivery. Such a feat would be encouraging, especially given the need to align the public services sector with the dictates of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and other statutes, policies, and regulations that advocate for an equal, non-racial, non-sexist, inclusive, and broadly representative South African society. The DPSA and other public services should also ensure that, as the overseer of the Framework and the custodian of human capital policies in the Republic, public entities are in compliance, and are frequently reminded, of the need to further the goals of a non-sexist South Africa. Such assurances could take the shape of awareness workshops and/or briefings of heads of public service entities. The article views such intervention as important for ensuring that women empowerment does not become a form of ‘window-dressing’ or merely a superficial activity, but rather that a culture of equity is established across the entire South African public services sector. Additionally, the national government should take the lead in ensuring that the basic values and principles that govern local public administration are pursued, especially those related to broad representation of and within public services. The gender equality focus also needs to shift from its current obsession on recruitment processes and expand its scope to also encompass internal mobility, such as through promotions and/or transfers. The article views such broader practices as a move towards realising more women in decision-making positions at a faster rate, because new recruits take a very long time to move up the hierarchy, unlike those who are already established in the organisation and can gain mobility through internal promotions. There are other HR processes that also require gender-mainstreaming, and which offer opportunities to women in relation to skills development programmes, performance management processes, career development programmes, retention, and wellness. These aspects may form part of future studies that could join larger platforms related to ongoing gender equality debates. In addition, future studies may include a comparative study between South African public service departments to assess the level of implementation of the Framework for gender equality across the sector as a whole.

6. CONCLUSION

Countries across the world should, both individually and collectively, pursue the SDG-5, which seeks to achieve gender equality. Gender inequality remains a challenge, both in South African and in the world at large, despite how women contribute far more towards the global gross domestic product (GDP) than their

male counterparts. Women continue to remain under-represented in employment as well as in other economic opportunities, and this situation is worsened in organisation where women are trapped under the proverbial glass ceiling. This article, therefore, assessed gender equality in the South African public services sector under various yardsticks. Findings in this article indicate an encouraging trend towards greater gender equality in the sector, but this trend still needs to be improved in order to effectively achieve the equal representation of women. The article argues that South Africa has great potential to attain a 50:50 ratio of women and men in opportunities and employment, given how advanced its Constitution is. In its supreme law, South Africa is built on non-sexist and equal society values. Therefore, the various stakeholders involved in the promotion of gender equality should collectively fight sexism and support the emancipation women, not only in order to provide them with gainful employment, but to ensure that women hold, and have access to, strategic decision-making positions. It is important to note that gender equality does not imply that as one gender is empowered, the other is disempowered. Rather, both are accorded equal opportunities, concurrently. Therefore, efforts to improve employees' skills capacity, or processes undertaken to employ, train, develop, promote, and motivate them should not be in any way discriminatory. Rather such practices should be non-sexist but still based on historical facts of male-domination and the need to undo existing sexist policies and practices.

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