

The Basic Act for Gender Equal Society and Current State of Woman's Participation in Society

E Togtuun

Department of Asian Studies, National University of Mongolia

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Abstract

From 2019 to 2021, a three-year project entitled “Comparative Study of Woman’s Social Participation in Japan and Mongolia” was conducted in collaboration with Showa Women’s University. Within the scope of this project, the translation into Mongolian of three books authored by Japanese writer Bando Mariko – “Women’s Dignity”, “Women’s Policies in Japan”, and “Woman’s Leaders 4.0” – was undertaken.

During this work, it became apparent that “Japan’s Basic Act for Gender Equal Society” had been implemented on 23 June 1999. It was understood that this legislation arose from two primary circumstance: firstly, addressing labour shortages caused by a declining birth rate, and secondly, facilitating women’s smooth advancement into society.

Twenty-five years have passed since the implementation of the Basic Law for Gender Equality. I undertook this research to ascertain how deeply this law has permeated contemporary Japanese society and to what extent it is recognized by the Japanese people. To this end, I visited Japan for one month, from 17 January to 17 February 2024, to conduct my investigation.

Keywords

Basic Act for Gender Equal Society, Japanese society, questionnaire survey, interview-based survey

1. Introduction

From 2019 to 2021, a three-year project entitled “Comparative Study of Woman’s Social Participation in Japan and Mongolia” was conducted in collaboration with Showa Women’s University. Within the scope of this project, the translation into Mongolian of three books authored by Japanese writer Bando Mariko – “Women’s Dignity”, “Women’s Policies in Japan”, and “Woman’s Leaders 4.0” – was undertaken.

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and to what extent it is recognized by the Japanese people. To this end, I visited Japan for one month, from 17 January to 17 February 2024, to conduct my investigation.

Literature Review

Research on women's participation in contemporary Japanese society spans multiple analytic domains, including public policy, labor market structures, family and care arrangements, social norms, and cross-national comparison. Within the policy domain, scholars have examined the formation and implementation of the Basic Act for Gender-Equal Society (1999) and subsequent policies aimed at promoting female participation in the labor force (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, *White Paper on Gender Equality* (Tokyo: Government of Japan, 2023); Mari Osawa, *Josei Seisaku no Genzai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2012)).

In the labor market literature, recurrent themes include gendered wage disparities, the underrepresentation of women in managerial positions, occupational segmentation, and the well-known “M-shaped” employment curve associated with childbirth and childcare (Naoko Nagase, *Jenda to Rōdō no Keizaigaku* (Tokyo: Keisō Shobō, 2001); Mary C. Brinton, *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)). Prior studies have demonstrated that career interruption constitutes a major mechanism contributing to persistent inequality in labor market outcomes (Ryōsuke Kosugi, *Youth Employment in Japan's Economic Recovery* (Tokyo: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2009); Hideki Chuma, “Women's Career Interruption and Wage Penalty in Japan,” *Journal of Labor Studies* (2014)).

Research in family studies and household sociology further highlights the unequal distribution of unpaid care work and the difficulty of establishing work–life balance in Japan's predominantly male-breadwinner regime (Sawako Shiranami, *Gendai Kazoku to Jendā* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2010); Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, *Statistics on Childcare Leave Acquisition* (Tokyo, 2022)). Cross-national comparative research situates Japan within broader OECD contexts, frequently contrasting it with Nordic welfare states characterized by dual-earner and dual-carer models (OECD, *Gender Wage Gap: Country Comparisons* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022); Margarita Estevez-Abe, “Gendering the Varieties of Capitalism,” *Social Politics* 12, no. 2 (2005): 180-215).

Additional sociological research has emphasized the continued influence of cultural norms and gender role expectations in shaping women's employment trajectories and occupational aspirations, suggesting that institutional reforms alone are insufficient to produce substantive equality (Shin'ichirō Inaba, *Shakai o Sasaeru 'Mienai' Chikara* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2004); Mary C. Brinton, *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)). Taken together, these strands of research reveal considerable insight into the structural and institutional conditions affecting women's employment in Japan. However, the literature remains disproportionately focused on macro-level indicators, legal frameworks, and aggregate labor statistics, while relatively few studies examine the subjective perception, experiential reception, and social internalization of gender-equality policy. The present study addresses this lacuna by employing survey and interview data to analyze how gender-equality policy has been perceived and evaluated within contemporary Japanese society.

2. Basic research

This research comprises two types investigation: a questionnaire survey and interviews. Eighty-three individuals participated the questionnaire survey and provided responses. Of these 83, 25 were university students and 58 were working adults. As this was not conducted through a specialized research organization, the number of participants was inevitably small, but the responses were diverse. The other component was interviews. Six individuals were interviewed: four women and two men.

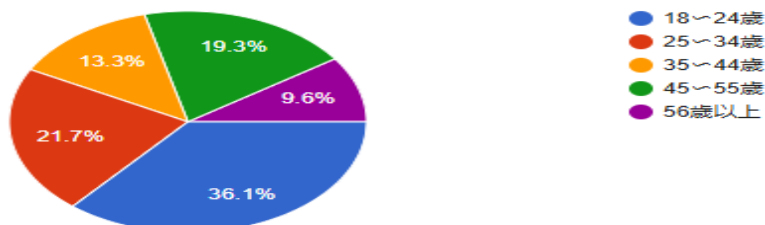
Questionnaire Survey

First, the questions included in the questionnaire survey and their answers are presented. The questionnaire comprised 15 questions in total, the content are responses being as follows.

2.1. Please circle the option that corresponds to your age

Looking the age distribution of the 83 respondents, the largest group (36.1%) were young people aged 18 to 24, followed by middle-aged people 25 to 34 (21.7%). The group aged 35 to 44 was 13.3%, 45 to 55 was 19.3%, and 56 and over was the smallest, at 9.6%.

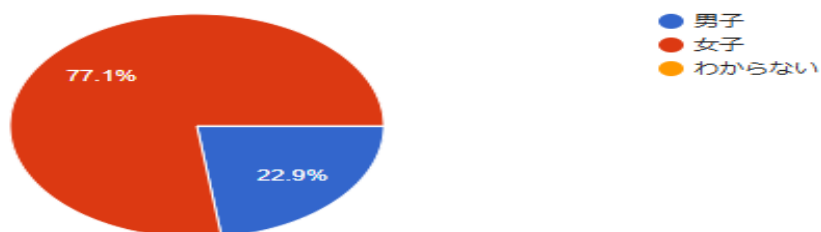
83 responses



2.2. Please circle your gender

Among the 83 respondents, 77.1% were female and 22.9% were male, indicating a significant predominance of women.

83 responses



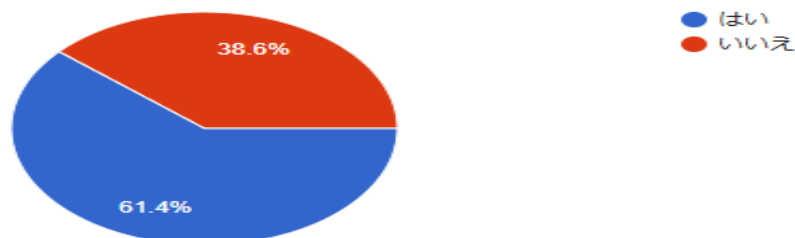
2.3. Please tick the box that applies to your family circumstances

In response to this question, 67.5% answered unmarried, 31.3% answered married.

2.4. We would like to ask about the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society, amended in 1999. Are you aware of this law? Please tick the applicable box

The graph shows that over half of respondents were aware of this law.

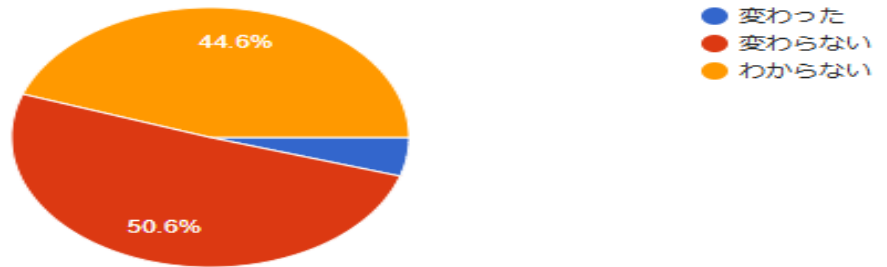
83 responses



2.5. Has your situation changed in any way since this law was enacted? Please tick the applicable box

From the responses to this question, it can be seen that combining 'No change' and 'Don't know' totals 55.4%, exceeding the 44.6% who answered 'Changed'.

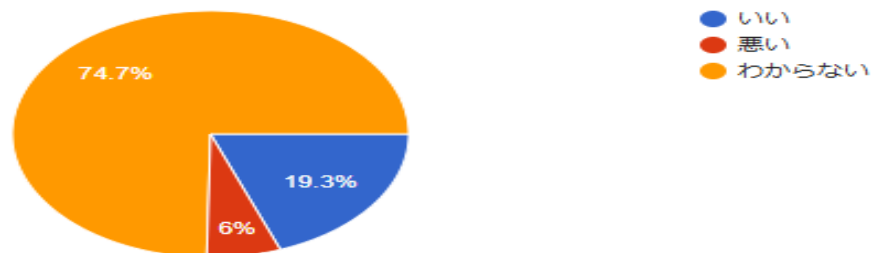
83 responses



2.6. What is your view regarding companies' implementation of this law? Please tick the applicable box

The graph below shows that the response 'Don't know' accounted for 74.7%, representing an overwhelming majority

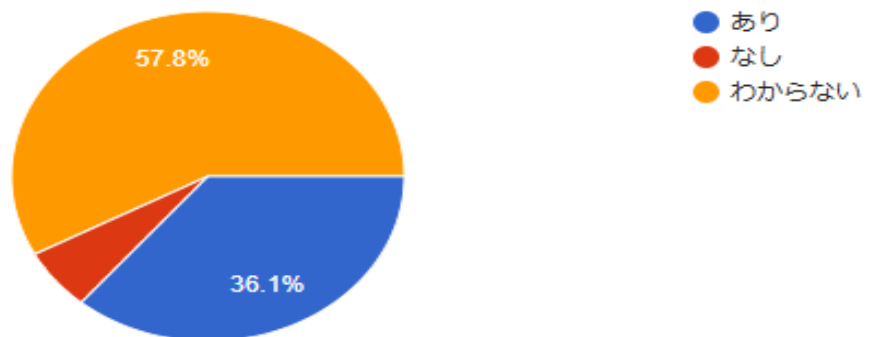
83 responses



2.7. Do you believe this law has had an impact on Japanese society? Please tick the applicable box

This graph also shows that the 'Don't know' response stands at 57.8%, exceeding 'Yes'.

83 responses



2.8. For those who answered 'Yes', please tell us why you think so

Twenty-six respondents answered this question, representing 31% of the total. By gender, 21 female respondents (80.7%) and 5 male respondents (19.3%) answered, indicating a significantly higher proportion of female respondents. Analysing by age, 13 respondents were aged 18 to 34, with only one male in this group. There were 8 middle-aged respondents aged 35 to 55, of whom 3 were male. Respondents aged 56 and over numbered 5, with only one male.

Summary of Detailed Opinions

Opinions of those who answered 'Yes'

- Increased opportunities for women to enter society and take on roles as managers and executives
- Employment opportunities for women within companies have expanded, and a more favourable working environment has been established
- Men taking paternity leave is gradually increasing, promoting greater involvement in the home
- Awareness of gender equality is gradually permeating society as a whole
- Significant improvements have been achieved in laws and systems

Opinions of those who answered 'Don't know'

- Aware of the law's existence but unable to perceive its concrete impact
- Changes within companies and society are difficult to discern

Opinions of those who answered 'None'

- No tangible changes perceived
- The law's effects are limited

Analysis results

Approximately 36% of respondents answered 'Yes, there has been an impact', citing specific changes such as women's increased participation in the workforce, a rise in female managerial positions, and greater male involvement in childcare. Conversely, 58% answered 'I don't know', highlighting the current situation where the law's effects are not sufficiently felt.

Furthermore, when responses were categorized by age and gender, the findings were as follows:

1. Aged 18 to 24, all respondents are female. There appears to be a glimmer of hope for the future of women in Japanese society.
2. Aged 25 to 34.

Women:

Japanese society is changing, but men still hold the upper hand.

Some hold the view that they do not wish to take on unnecessary responsibilities towards women. This became an opportunity for people to realize that women could become socially vulnerable.

Man:

This disparity before the law was far greater than it is now.

3. Aged 35 to 44, all respondents are female.

Legally, things have changed, so companies now make minimal efforts. But it's certainly not enough.

We are in an era of dual-income households, and it seems there are environments where women can enter society and work more easily.

The societal impact of women's professional advancement and the resulting strain on their personal lives has significantly affected society as a whole, both before and after the law.

4. Aged 45 to 55, all respondents are female.

According to journalism studies, the message being conveyed is that things are improving.

Awareness of gender equality is gradually spreading.

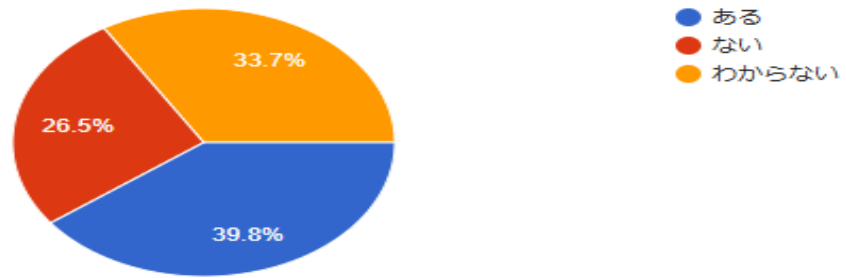
5. Aged 56 and above, all respondents are female.

Women's participation in society and the number of women in management positions have increased. This is due to legislation.

2.9. Do you have any thoughts on the future of gender disparities in Japan? Please tick the applicable box

In response to this question, 39.8% of respondents provided their own written opinion.

83 responses



2.10. If you answered 'Yes', please tell us your thoughts

Thirty-two respondents provided answers, representing 38.5% of the total. By gender, 27 were female (84.3%) and 5 were male (15.7%). The breakdown by age group is as follows:

- 18-24 years old: 9
- 25-34 years old: 9
- 35-44 years old: 4
- 45-55 years old: 5
- 55 years and over: 4

Summary of detailed opinions

Opinions of those who answered 'Yes'

- The burden of housework and children on women remains significant making work-life balance difficult
- The proportion of women in management positions and politics remains low
- Male paternity leave uptake rates are low, with a strong sense of individual responsibility
- Wage gaps and unequal promotion opportunities persist
- Long-term career breaks due to pregnancy and childbirth disadvantage women's careers
- Progress is lagging in small and medium-sized enterprises and regional areas
- Outdated customs and stereotypes remain deeply entrenched

Opinions from those who answered 'Don't know'

- Gender disparities are gradually being resolved
- Equality is being realized through legislation

Analysis results

Approximately 40% responded that they 'have an opinion', pointing to specific challenges such as the burden of housework and childcare, the gender ratio in management positions, and the persistence of outdated stereotypes. This indicates that many problems remain to be resolved. Particular emphasis is placed on the difficulties working women face in balancing work and family life.

Furthermore, examining respondents' views by age reveals generational differences in perspective.

Respondents aged 18-24 stated: 'The gap still remains, but I have hope that things will change'.

Respondents aged 25-34 stated: 'Significant disparities persist both in society and at the individual level'.

Respondents aged 35-44 stated: 'Were still bound by old customs, and the gap remains significant. I believe women are inevitably socially disadvantaged in Japan'.

Among those aged 45-55, women responded that 'inequalities still persist', while men countered that 'support for childcare, such as maternity leave and childcare assistance, is now available. It's becoming easier for women to work'.

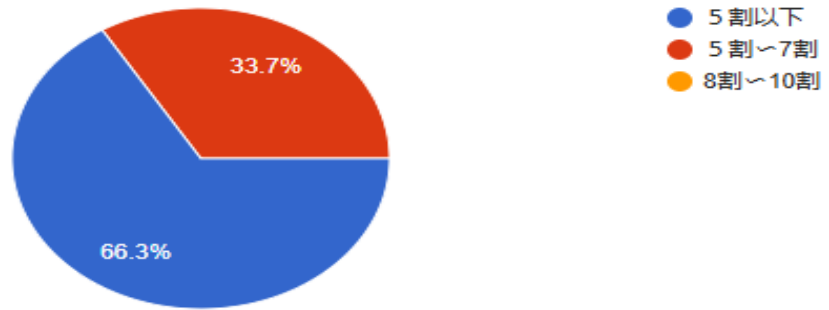
Among those aged 56 and over, women stated, 'There is inequality. Men need to change', while men responded, 'Inequality is decreasing'.

Among respondents, the younger generation appears to hold a positive and optimistic outlook on the future, whereas middle-aged women seem to view the future with despair. Although the number of male respondents was low, they maintain that society is improving for the better due to the Basic Law.

2.11. To what extent do you think this law has increased the possibility of balancing work and family life? Please tick the applicable box

This question reveals that 66.3% of respondents believe the possibility of balancing work and family life is 50% or less.

83 responses



2.12. Do you believe the gender pay gap has disappeared? Please tick the applicable box
For this question, 'has not begun' and 'don't know' accounted for 67,5% of respondents, exceeding the percentage who selected 'has begun to disappear'.

83 responses



2.13. If you selected option ②, please explain why you think so.

Thirteen respondents who selected 'Has not begun' provided written comments, representing 15.8% of all respondents. By gender, 12 were female (92.3%) and 1 was male (7.7%). The breakdown by age group is as follows:

- 18-24 years old: 6 people
- 25-34 years old: 2 people
- 35-44 years old: 2 people
- 45-55 years old: 3 people (including one male respondent)
- 55 years and over: 1 people

Summary of detailed opinions

Opinions from those who responded 'It has started to disappear'

- Gradual signs of improvement due to the development of laws and systems
- Progress in gender equality initiatives at major corporations

Opinions of those who responded 'Has not begun'

- Women are disproportionately represented in non-regular employment, with clear wage disparities
- Substantial disparities persist due to overwhelming male dominance in management roles
- Improvements are lagging in SMEs and regional areas
- Women predominate among part-time workers
- Wage disparities arise from unequal promotion opportunities

Opinions of those who answered 'Don't know'

- Lack of concrete data or personal experience
- Significant variation exists by occupation and company

Analysis results

While approximately 47% gave positive assessment stating 'it has begun to disappear', 21% responded that 'it has not begun'. Structural issues such as the high proportion of women in non-regular employment and the male-dominated nature of management positions are cited as underlying causes of the wage gap. Significant disparities by company size and region are also apparent.

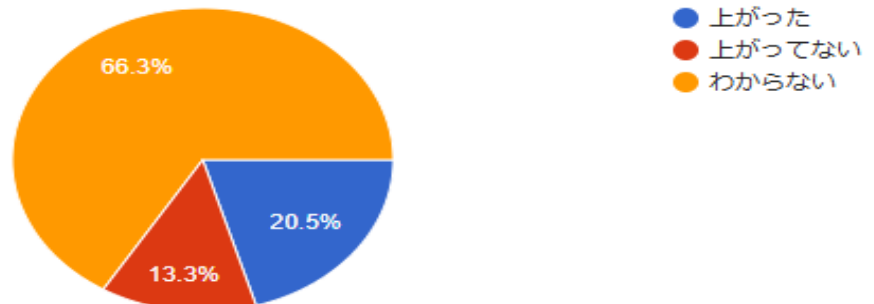
Furthermore, the following four reasons were cited for why women's wages are lower:

- Part-time work
- Non-regular employment
- Less likely to attain managerial positions
- Less hidden compensation

2.14. How much do you think women's advancement opportunities in the workplace have increased? Please circle the applicable option

Here too, the responses 'Has not increased' (13.3%) and 'don't know' (66.3%) account for 79.6%, overwhelmingly outnumbering 'Has increased'.

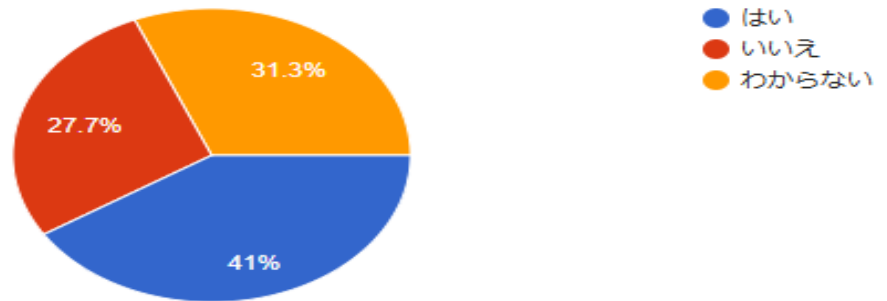
83 responses



2.15. Do you wish to aim more promotion or leadership roles?

It can be seen that the number of people who answered 'Yes' is lower than those who answered 'No' or 'Don't know'.

83 responses



Summarising the responses from the 83 survey participants yields the following. The data indicates a desire for change, yet it reaffirms the persistence of societal conventions and the inherent vulnerability of Japanese women’s positions. Furthermore, while legally unproblematic, it appears women are in state of waiting for society or men to make the first move.

3. Interview-based survey

We interviewed six people to hear their views on the changes that have occurred in Japanese society since the enactment of the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society.

Interview 1: Bando Mariko (President Showa Women’s University, female, aged 70+)

“Women’s will and attitude towards entering society and working have grown stronger. However, their desire to taken on managerial roles themselves or to advance is still quite weak. The gender pay gap has narrowed considerably compared to before the law was enacted. Previously, the difference was around 40%, but it has now fallen to 20%.”

Interview 2: Tsunoda Eiichi (Atsumi Foundation, male, aged 70+)

“The very notion of distinguishing between men and women in society is peculiar. Yet, given that Biological sex exists, what boys do and what girls do are different. That is unavoidable. Particularly for a people like us Japanese who practise agriculture. For instance, in my household, I have two sons. Both are married with children. The son living in Japan moved to place near our family home. His mother assists with looking after the grandchildren. The order son married an American woman. She, on the other hand, quit her job to focus on raising the children. She intends to bring them up herself until they are three or four years old. This issue is very complicated. There are so many different lifestyles.”

Interview 3: Hashizume Yumi (Associate Professor, University of Tsukuba, female, around 55 years old)

“The debate should start from the fundamental question of whether this law should have been enacted in the first place.”

Interview 4: Imai Shingo (JALESA General corporation, male, around 50 years old)

“In Japanese society, it’s difficult for women to balance family and work after marriage and child-birth. It’s really unfair on the children. If you’ve had a child, you have to look after them. It’s outrageous for them to be left alone forever with no one to care for them.”

Interview 5: Hirose Aya (Member of Theatre Artists Changing the Invoice System, female, around 30 years old)

“Women must speak strongly from their current positions to improve society, however slightly. If we don’t, when our children grow up and ask, ‘Why didn’t you do anything to improve the society we live in when you were young?’, we won’t have an answer.”

Interview6: Ulzisaikhan Naran (International student at Kokushikan University, female, 20 years old)

“According to a male student studying law at my host university, the legal framework for women’s working environments is established. What happens next depends entirely on the women themselves”

Summarising the views of the six interviewees reveals two coexisting perspectives.

The first is a critical stance towards women, suggesting that despite legal conditions being established to improve women's standing in society, women themselves lack sufficient initiative or effort.

The second is the view that once married and having children, it is necessary to prioritise the children.

4. Finally to conclude

Summarising the responses from 83 individuals and 6 interviews, the following observations regarding contemporary Japanese society can be made. There exists a collective desire within Japanese society for change. However, due to the persistence of old societal customs, the perceived weakness of Japanese women's position, or perhaps a lack of effort, women appear to be waiting for action from society or men. In contrast, men appear to harbour critical views towards women, perceiving them as lacking initiative or effort, despite the existence of legal frameworks designed to improve women's standing in society. In other words, 25 years after the enactment of the Basic Act on Gender Equality, it can be said that the fundamental principles of this legislation are beginning to take root within contemporary Japanese society. The increasing participation of Japanese women in society is now largely driven by their own motivation.

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