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## UNIT 2 SEX AND GENDER

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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After reading about how forces of patriarchy affect gender, especially women, in this unit we will be looking into how sex and gender are differentiated and what are the current debates on this issue. You will also learn about how these concepts emerged and their importance for gender discourses. This unit will familiarize you with sex and gender as a system, roles of gender and criticism of sex-gender as a binary division. You will also learn how gender is constructed as a paradox and how sexing of the body takes place.

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### 2.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

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After going through the unit you will be able to:

- Define the concepts of sex - gender in relation to the sex-gender system;
- Describe the various gender roles and patterns existing in society;
- Understand sex and gender in relation to the body; and
- Discuss the feminist critique of sex-gender binary opposition.

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### 2.3 CONTEXTUALIZING SEX AND GENDER

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Who hasn't heard about the difference between sex and gender? At least in the English speaking world, the sex-gender distinction has probably become one of the most well known aspects of feminism. Once you have even a bit of familiarity with feminism and women's studies you would almost certainly have come across these terms. At one level, they are easy to distinguish – sex refers to the biological differences between male and female bodies, while gender refers to everything else that goes into making us

“men” and “women” – social and cultural processes, economic and political structures. However, as this unit will try and help you understand, questions of sex and gender turn out to be not so simple or obvious at all, and have become some of the most hotly debated concepts in feminist theory.

First of all, let us notice that the actual terms themselves – sex and gender – exist in this way only in the English language. No other language – whether French or German, Tamil, Hindi or Chinese – has two terms that refer to the biological and social differences of the two sexes. The sex- gender distinction is thus different from the previous term we had discussed, namely patriarchy, a term which did not offer such difficulties of translation. The distinctions between “biology” and the “social” have also been approached in much related ways. The most common pair of terms to have been used is nature and culture. These two terms have also played an extremely significant role in feminist theorizing.

Let us begin this unit with some background information on the terms sex and gender. The term sex has of course a long history of being used to refer to men and women (apart from its second meaning which has to do with sexual activity). Think of how the term was used in classic texts like **Mary Wollstonecraft’s** *A indication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), written at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England. Wollstonecraft uses the notion of sex in order to discuss and criticise the entire process that went into making “women” different from “men”, which today we might call processes of social construction. Wollstonecraft believed that women were brought up to be the weaker sex unlike men who were granted the capacity for rational thought and political action. Or again, take the famous work of the French feminist **Simone de Beauvoir’s** *The Second Sex* (written in France in the 1949 and translated into English in 1955), which has been another classic treatise on the nature of women’s oppression in society and history. So, in the history of feminist thought we have those who did not see any reason to make a distinction between biological sex and social gender, and used the term sex to make their arguments.

The term gender has a very different history. It originates in grammar and linguistics – where it originally only referred to the use of different genders in particular languages, and had no other connotations. Thus, for instance, chair in Hindi has a feminine gender, and the sun in Hindi has a masculine gender, and so on. Different languages have different patterns of gender in this way. English is not as strongly gendered in the way German and French are. Among Indian languages it would be interesting to look at their grammatical gender uses, as there is considerable variation.

It is, therefore, noteworthy that for the first time in the 1950s, certain American psychologists, followed by sociologists, used the term gender to connote the gender identity of human beings. They made a sharp contrast between the biological notions of male and female (such as genital differences, chromosomal or hormonal differences) and the way we get our sense of who we are as boys and girls or men and women. Some of these psychologists argued that it mattered very little what exact biological characteristics a particular body might have – what really mattered was how such a child was socialised by their family and by society more broadly.

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## 2.4 THE SEX-GENDER SYSTEM

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It was such ideas of a strong difference between biological sex and social gender that were picked up by feminists in the 1970s and in the years that followed. One of the

earliest formulations came from a famous essay by **Gayle Rubin** written in 1974, in which she explained what she called “the sex-gender system”. Rubin begins her analysis of women’s oppression by making some very plausible claims: whoever we are, whether we are feminist or against feminist ideas, it is what we think the causes of women’s oppression to be that will determine what kind of society we imagine to be possible in future. Thus, if we believe that men are innately aggressive and violent by nature, there would be little scope for change other than to physically alter men’s very nature or to get rid of them! But if we allow that much of society and economic relations within society, are playing a role in women’s oppression, then a different and more egalitarian future is possible by changing these social and economic structures.

**Box No. 2.1**

*Drawing on the work of a range of major theorists, including Marx, Freud and the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, Gayle Rubin proposes that the “sex-gender system” “is the set of arrangements whereby a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (Rubin, 1974, p.159).*

In Rubin’s theory, then, biological differences between men and women form a kind of backdrop for the gender system, whose basic structure she locates in theories of kinship, especially the exchange of women by men through the institution of marriage. This is how a social system is imposed on the natural world, since it is men who do the exchanging; the “giving” of women, where men have rights that women do not. There are further differences between men and women, such as a division of labour whereby certain tasks are seen to belong to the man and others to the woman. Rubin goes on to discuss how the social system imposed on natural differences, may even result in exclusive gender identities that suppress natural similarities – thus, any “feminine” traits in a man have to be suppressed as well as “masculine” traits in a woman. She also emphasizes how the sex-gender system is not only about making sure that the world is divided into two distinct groups of people, men and women, but also that proper socialisation and development include compulsory heterosexual relations, preferably through marriage. That is to say, the ‘proper’ woman must be married to a man. Therefore a critical look at the sex-gender system is not only necessary for those interested in promoting a society in which men and women would be equal, but is also meant to provide tools of analysis for the gay and lesbian movements whose sexual orientations have been treated as deviant and who are looking for ways to critique the existing normative heterosexual structures in society. Let us now turn to the implications of our understanding of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ on the many roles of gender.

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## **2.5 THE MANY ROLES OF GENDER**

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A great deal of feminist theorizing took advantage of the distinction between sex and gender to argue that biological differences mattered little when compared to the gendering of men and women in society. When a baby is born, what is the first question everyone asks – is it a boy or a girl? Do we ask how the mother is? Is it a healthy child? These questions invariably come later. So determining the sex of a child is absolutely necessary (and we will come back to this later.) But once the sex of the child is established, feminists and sociologists emphasized the extent to which social processes of gendering

take over the life of the child. Pink and blue clothes in western societies for example announce the sex of the child to everyone present. In an interesting experiment conducted in Britain, a baby was dressed in typical baby girl clothes and handed over to the relatives and friends who had come to greet the newborn. It was discovered that most of those present held the baby softly and gently, rocked the baby in their arms, and spoke in feminine ways. The same baby was dressed up to look like a baby boy and other visitors were told it was a boy. Their behaviour and treatment were remarkably different: they tossed up the baby in the air, talked to the baby in strong tones, and said things like how it would certainly grow up to be like his father. Thus very stereotypical notions of being a girl or boy were projected onto the baby. And of course, you as learners can think of the innumerable ways in which we socialise children differently – from the appropriate toys for girls and boys, rules of play and so on, which become only stronger as the child grows older. How many little girls play that most popular game namely cricket? How many boys play with dolls? And why are we disturbed if a girl were to play with a toy gun? All of these go into producing different gender identities.

***Check Your Progress:***

***Activity: Based on the above discussion, come up with a list of typically “masculine” and “feminine” attributes generally attributed to baby boys and baby girls. Conduct a survey in your family/ neighbourhood / peer group to see how people respond to cultural stereotypes.***

Scholars also argued that an emphasis on gender rather than biological sex was necessary for at least two reasons: Firstly, in order to explain the extent to which societies and cultures differ according to the roles played by men and women in them; and secondly, to understand change in the course of history. If women’s roles were based only on their biology, then how do we account for so much variation and change? Thus, for example, there are several so-called simple societies where the relations between men and women are not obviously unequal, such as certain Eskimo peoples, or Native American groups. In many parts of Africa, it is women who are the mainstay of agricultural production and even trade, something very hard to imagine in mainstream Indian society where women are invariably treated as secondary workers and the “farmer” (*Kisan* in Hindi) is thought of as male! (The work of the anthropologist Henrietta Moore offers some very interesting examples of gender differences across different societies.) Equally interesting, consider the norms of behaviour and dress codes for men and women in different cultures and at different historical moments. Look at art and sculpture for instance – the paintings of *Ajanta* depict bodies of men and women where it is very difficult to even tell who is male and who is female, since the overall styles are so similar. Even in countries like pre-industrial England, dress codes and behaviour among aristocratic men would appear extremely feminine to a modern person – such men were dainty in appearance, wore high heeled shoes, highly colourful clothing, used make up and wore wigs.

In this way, a lot of gender analysis went to prove the extent of variation and change in the construction of men and women. Some scholars emphasized the symbolic role of gender at different historical moments. While Gayle Rubin focuses mainly on women, many gender theorists were as interested in focusing on men and notions of masculinity with a link to corresponding notions of femininity. They pointed out that it was not enough to look at the social construction of women in society and history, but men

were equally socially constructed, if in relative positions of privilege compared to women of their group or class. Indeed, such theorists criticised approaches that only focused on the role or oppression of women, seeing in this an incomplete picture. That is also why we have another unit on masculinity (Unit 3) in this block.

In the previous unit of this block, you read about how early work in the field of women's studies tended to focus on the invisibility of women. Gender theorists added to this insight by showing how mainstream thinkers are not only guilty of making women invisible, but that they make gender as a whole invisible, where gender here refers to the overall unequal relations between men and women. Think of the very meanings of the words "man" and "woman". The word man in most languages has a double meaning – it can refer just to those who are biologically male, as well as to 'Man' in the sense of 'mankind', namely the entire human race. (In Hindi words like *Manush* also embody both meanings.) Now consider the word 'woman'. It has no such double meaning – the term women refer to those who are female, (including those who may wish to be included as women, such as *hijras* for instance.) But it cannot ever refer to all of humanity. (Another interesting example in Hindi would be the words *beta* and *beti* used for small children. There is no problem when little girls are referred to as *beta* in everyday life – but *beti* can only be used for girls. Imagine the disturbance that would be created if little boys were also called *beti*!)

You may be able to think of several examples such as "cave man", "primitive man" or "man power", where the masculine is often to stand for both men and women.

As you may have observed from the above discussion that, there is, thus, a fundamental asymmetry in the man-woman dyad – the first moves across two registers, claiming universal status while anchored in the male; the second has only a particular meaning, it can never include men. It is precisely this gender asymmetry that has made it possible in much of modern history for 'man' to claim a false universality, to stand in for everyone, while actually excluding women (and others). A famous example here is the universality that came to be embodied in the French Revolution and its "Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen". (In the French language the double meaning is openly visible because the French language is more gendered than English. All nouns are gendered which includes the prefix "*le*" for a masculine noun and "*la*" for a feminine noun, unlike the more neutral "the" in English. As you might expect, the citizen in this declaration was gendered masculine.) So, here we have a declaration claiming to be based on universal rights, claiming to overthrow the privilege of the feudal classes, but which did not in fact include everyone. Women were excluded from these so-called universal rights, as were working class men without property. So the use of the word 'man' or pronouns like 'he', prior to feminist criticism of such usage, created the impression of being universal and inclusive, when this was usually far from being the case. (In order to correct this, it has become more common to say 'she or he' in current usage or to write "s/he" to signify either or. Another correction is to use the neutral word 'person' rather than 'man', as in 'chairperson' rather than 'chairman'.)

***Check Your Progress:***

- 1) ***Define the concepts of 'sex' and 'gender' within the sex-gender system, with the help of your own examples.***
- 2) ***Make a list of other gender neutral words that have come in common usage in place of earlier gendered words.***

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## 2.6 SOME CRITICISMS OF THE SEX-GENDER BINARY

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Even while a great deal of very interesting new scholarship emerged focusing on gender relations, there were also criticisms of this approach. One kind of critique has been associated with the work of **Judith Butler**, a philosopher, feminist and queer theorist. Her criticisms are quite complex and have also been evolving in her numerous writings. So in this unit it will only be possible to provide a short and simple summary. According to Butler, a common problem in the use of the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ (in the way for instance that Gayle Rubin did in her 1974 essay), is that there is an assumption of a given biological fact of sex, as something fixed in the body, which is then provided meaning by social gender. To use an easy metaphor, it is as though sex is the body (like the determination of the sex of a baby), while gender are the clothes that come later. As she asks pointedly, if indeed feminists and other scholars believed that biological sex has very little to do with gender, then why have we proceeded with two sexes and two genders, with gender faithfully following sex? It is as though ‘sex’ is the ground and ‘gender’ the social effect. Butler instead turns the sex – gender distinction on its head: There is nothing like a pre-social notion of sex fixed by “nature”. Rather “sex” is as much the product of social and political institutions as ideas of gender are. So she makes sex the effect of gender rather than its cause. Precisely because gender is a very open-ended and contingent process involving complex formations of identity (a person’s sense of self in relation to others), as well as sexual desires (which may be for the opposite sex but could equally be for the same sex), it has been necessary, especially in modern western societies, to “fix” such potentially fluid identities through recourse to notions of an immutable and unchanging sex rooted in biology.

Judith Butler’s work has therefore looked at gender identity as a process that is constantly being created through repeated everyday acts and performances of that identity, constrained by ideas, discourses and institutions that are shaping these identities and giving them recognizable meanings. Much of her work shows where and how this happens, the roles played by both gender norms and norms of heterosexuality, and how this can be questioned. You will read in greater details about her ideas in the Course “Gendered Bodies and Sexualities”.(MWG 004)

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## 2.7 THE PARADOX OF GENDER

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Let us now look at another way of discussing the problems with the sex- gender system which can be called the paradox of gender. Consider for a moment some of the major aspects that are involved in the biological distinction of the sexes – for example, while the body size of men and women show considerable internal variation, on average, male bodies are somewhat more muscular and taller than female bodies. (This has been the basis for making sharp distinctions between men and women in the field of sports for instance.) Another anatomical and physiological difference has to do with procreation – it is women as a sex who can bear children as a consequence of sexual intercourse with men. Till about the mid nineteenth century in western societies and till the middle of the twentieth century in countries like India, women had, on average, very high rates of fertility, giving birth to many children in the course of their reproductive lives. As a consequence women under these conditions also experienced high rates of

child mortality and maternal mortality. In such situations, where every day life was subjected to considerable uncertainties and physical hardship for the vast majority, both men and women would have had to endure the consequences of their biological vulnerabilities to a considerable degree. This condition was to change substantially only well after the rise of capitalism and colonialism, the consequent creation of wealth in western societies of a scale unprecedented, the expansion of cities as new sites of production, including the gradual increase in standards of living. Correspondingly, for reasons that are not entirely clear, western families underwent major transformations, especially among the new middle classes, so that by the end of the nineteenth century families had far fewer children and, under improved conditions of public health, mortality rates also came down. Moreover, children started attending schools in increasing numbers. The nature of work also changed – with productive labour moving outside the household into factories and offices in urban areas, and agricultural production being the province of smaller and smaller proportions of people. With all these developments a plausible argument could be made that the significance of biological difference – childbirth for women and physical strength for men no longer enjoyed much social significance. Women had more opportunities to engage in new kinds of work, married at later ages or stayed single, did not have to be worn out by repeated child birth and childcare. Work was increasingly technologised.

Coming back to the paradox of gender : the differences of gender – that is to say, beliefs about the roles of women and men and the corresponding sexual division of labour, political rights for men and their denial to women, the division between public and private realms of society, and so on – were *maximised* precisely at this time. Thus, the new middle class home in the nineteenth century was reinvented to become a space of love and care, (unlike the pre-industrial household of the peasant, the merchant or the artisan where economic production was central), so much so that production was now associated with public life. Women were thought of as inherently weak and incapable of rational thought or the exercise of political rights, whose primary duties were the care of the home as wives and mothers – middle class men were, on the other hand, rational, public and political. It has therefore been said that a kind of bipolar gender regime was sought to be created during this era. In other words, precisely when the significance of basic biological distinctions were reducing, gendering was increasing. This is understood by the paradox of gender and its normative structures.

### **Sexing the Body**

Let us now look at the notions of the anatomical body and physiological body, which are the basis of 'sex' and the domain of nature. As we have seen, in the first stages of feminist theorizing on the distinction between sex and gender, less attention was paid to sex and most attention to questions of gender. Thus, it was common to hear that while it was true that women's biological reproduction made them child bearers, this had no consequences on their capacities more generally – they were capable of working, thinking, taking political decisions, and so on. So those who argued that women only belonged to the home as mothers were guilty of having the wrong beliefs about gender, and biology had nothing to do with it.

However, there were those, especially feminists interested in the field of science who were keen to investigate ideas of sex and their possible relationship to gender. In our everyday understanding of the anatomical differences of sex, we conceive of it as something given or fixed. When we refer to women as biologically female we have in

mind one or more of the following — female genitals, an XX chromosome structure and certain female hormones. Men, on the other hand, are identified by male genitals, an XY chromosome and male hormones. But what does all this mean? How have scientists discovered and theorized these various aspects? Do all women and all men have these characteristics and in the same way? Are we clearly divided into two sexes?

There is now a large literature on these kinds of issues, and there seems to be nothing obvious about how sex works. First and foremost, it is necessary to question a naive approach to the field of science itself. It is commonplace to think of science as objective and neutral since it is studying the seemingly non-social aspects of the world, life forms, plants, animals and human beings. Especially after the widespread discovery of theories of evolution – the idea that human beings evolved at some early point in pre-history from apes – which displaced to a considerable degree religious beliefs about the origins and nature of human life, science has become the most powerful source of “truth” about us and our worlds. It is important to reflect on how research done by science is exerting tremendous influence over our understanding, including biological theories about sex and what is considered the natural development of men and women in society. Such influences may be at their strongest in western societies, but they are increasingly gaining ground in contexts like ours as well.

A good place to start would be with what makes us male and female. According to the feminist scholar of science, **Anne Fausto-Sterling**, who is a biologist and a feminist, though scientists might want to believe otherwise, it is actually quite impossible to somehow separate out purely “scientific” and purely “biological” characteristics. They are invariably entangled and embedded in social ideas, that is to say, our notions of gender. For instance, it seems easy to say – based on contemporary science – that a combination of external genital characteristics, chromosomes and hormonal balance determines the sex of a person. But what exactly is this combination and how does it work? There are no clear answers here.

This is most obvious when it comes to trying to understand the nature of bodies where the sexual characteristics are not obvious – such as the bodies of those who are intersex (with different combinations of male and female characteristics), or when external genitals are not matched by the corresponding male or female chromosomes. Thus, for instance, if a particular body has the XY chromosome but not the corresponding male genitalia, what should be the sex of such a person? There can really be no answer to such a question. The functioning of hormones, for instance is also quite complex, since men and women have, in fact, both male and female hormones in their systems. **Fausto-Sterling** has shown quite convincingly how scientists as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards believed that it was necessary to maintain a clear distinction between two sexes – indeterminate sexes should be “normalised” as far as possible, and brought as close as possible to one sex or the other. This belief has grown stronger over the years – right up to the 1980s and 90s, and has only been more widely criticised in very recent years.

### Box No 2.3

*In other words, one can see that scientists have been guided by social norms, especially by ideas of deviance or abnormality, rather than any ideas of pure science.*



According to scientists like Fausto-Sterling, therefore, there is no hard and fast line to be drawn between sex and gender, and the early line drawn by both feminists and certain psychologists was quite premature. Sex and Gender are far more entangled than we realize: In fact it would be a mistake to believe that there are two distinct kinds of processes – one guided by genes, hormones and brain cells and the other by the environment we live in, experience, learning and social forces more generally. Nor should we simply displace biology and claim that everything is shaped by social processes. The best that can be said is that one should not fall into false dichotomies – the world of the natural is itself far more complex than we know at this point. Least of all, should it be left to science to tell us what is inherently desirable, healthy or natural when it comes to our bodies, our sexuality and our identities.

This is why it would be true to say that the sex -gender distinction is still used by various feminists, social scientists and scientists. But today it is much less clear as to what conclusions should be drawn from this, especially when it comes to individuals who do not fit simply into “male” and “female” identities.

At its best, the sex-gender distinction can make us more prepared to accept more openness and variation in our identities as human beings. Certainly, as feminists we can question the ways in which distinctions of sex and gender has been largely used against the interests of women. After all, various theories claiming to be scientific at different points of time have tried to claim that the nature of women’s brain constrains their capacity to think or reason as men do; or that certain genes make a man or a woman heterosexual or homosexual. These kinds of theories are probably the most harmful because they are mostly used to reinforce gender asymmetries, or to try and fix people once and for all in terms of sexualities. Today, there are a growing number of organisations that are more sensitive to and open towards the gender identities of men and women. A growing LGBT and Queer movement and their supporters have demanded taking sexual orientation out of the closet of deviance and abnormality, the rights of inter-sex people are gaining ground, as well as those of transgender and others to have identities that do not have to conform to one of two sexes or genders. This is why the sex-gender distinction which came into existence about half a century ago has undergone significant change. (You can read more about issues of queer movements and queer liberations in MWG 001s)

Even more important, it is absolutely essential to go beyond the discussion of this unit, to see that sex-gender is not the only way in which women are selectively differentiated from men and oppressed in society. This is because there are other forms of discrimination and inequality in society with powerful effects on the lives of women and men. Other blocks of this course will be discussing issues pertaining to class, caste and race, questions of disability and so on, which are equally pertinent to a better understanding of the oppression of women and the way to realize a future of greater equality.

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## 2.8 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, you have looked at the background against which the categories of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ have been variously defined. You would have realized that the sex-gender system, as a concept, is not as simple or obvious as it may first appear. Gender roles, the relation of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ with the body, the impossibility of clearly defining categories of ‘sex’ in scientific or biological terms, all of these lead us to think about the

actual complexity of these concepts. A brief examination of Gayle Rubin's work and Judith Butler's work on these related concepts would have also helped you to view the sex-gender binary from a critical perspective. Finally, the unit should have helped you to question the conventional definitions of 'sex' and 'gender' due to their negative impacts on women. Hopefully, your understanding of these issues will impel you to think further about, and analyse several of the subtle issues related to these concepts.

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## 2.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) How are gender roles significant in determining how we think about 'sex' and 'gender'? Discuss with the help of examples.
- 2) What is meant by "sexing the body"? Explain this concept in your own words.
- 3) How have conventional understandings and definitions of 'sex' and 'gender' impacted women? In your view, what are some of the ways in transform these conventional definitions to bring about positive changes in the lives of women?
- 4) Explain the "paradox of gender" with the help of examples.

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## 2.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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