

**THE ADVOCACY PROCESS OF UN WOMEN, UAE GOVERNMENT AND THE  
UAE'S GENERAL WOMEN'S UNION  
TO INCREASE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION  
IN THE PARLIAMENT IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES  
2004-2017**

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**ABSTRACT**

This journal is about the advocacy process of the UN Women as an International actor, UAE Government as the state actor, and the UAE's General Women's Union as the civil-society actor, in form of women's movement, to increase the Emirati women's participation in politics, especially in the parliament. This journal is written by the author's interest in discussing the advocacy process of empowering women in the United Arab Emirates to enhance their role in politics.

The general provisions of the Federal Supreme Council that had perceived the equality of the UAE citizens before the law. As for the Federal National Council, the increasing percentage of women in the parliament has become the very significant remark of women in the United Arab Emirates for their role in politics. Also, the cooperation between UN Women and the UAE's General Women's Union, as well as another outside parties.

**Keywords:** *United Arab Emirates, UN Women, General Women's Union, Advocacy Process*

## **A. Background**

As a matter of fact, women exceed that of men in terms of population; it said that two third of the world's population are women. However, women are the most affected ones regarding to the equal rights with their male counterparts. The inequality has been putting women as the inferiors; in which allows them to do almost nothing but to accept the situation as it is; also it has worsen by the art of patriarchy, women subordinates, the rooted perception that public domains are for those (men) as the ones who are granted to it, also the very reciprocal relation of men to government instead of the people to government is socially constructed.

In politics, male has been dominating the arena in which feminists believe that it should not be accepted any longer. Male counterparts who are contributing very much as the decision makers had lost its credibility when it comes to certain policies that might affect women; social prejudice and treatment towards women, office hours for women, birth-leaving days off, women-friendly public facilities; and they often failed to see that women should be the ones to take care of these policies. Women who are the most affected by the "system" should be the ones to take a chance for change.

The absence of women in politics, particularly in the decision-making process, only has the male counterparts kept doing what they have been doing; as it is quite impossible that lots of men did not realize how such ignorance towards the issue encountered by women could bear a very serious impact for the entire nations in the world. Such circumstance had women gathered around to bring the notion to the surface to help them sorting out solutions for themselves. Through the women movements, NGOs, also other legal bodies and institutions; local, national nor international; women are chasing after their goals to achieve an equality. By embarking the notion of gender and its entitlement to equality, women have

been departing from the darkness to bring the awareness and to shape public's opinion towards women.

The issue of inequality has women identified who they really are; women are subject as similar as men who are able to have powers and controls over themselves. Women have been very much aware that they could also pursue their dreams and to achieve more for their future just like their male counterparts could.

It has been seven decades since the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) held its first consolidation in the New York, not long after the founding of the United Nation. The Commission was then recognised by the UN, which was later on involved in one of the UN Departments; Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW); in the UN Secretariat. The first achievement of the Commission was the contribution in the United Declaration for Human Rights (UDHR) 1947 by successfully argued that the Commission was against the word 'men' as a synonym for humanity, yet women should entitled one, too.

UN WOMEN was coined in 2011 by the United Nations as it is probably one of the divisions with the very dedication towards equality. The four systems in the United Nations; *Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)*, *International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)*, *UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)* and *Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI)*; had merged into UN WOMEN. Under the supervision of the United Nations, UN Women spread its wings and broaden its dedication for the world's gender subject.

UN WOMEN has done numerous works for empowering women in many countries. If the flight goes to India, UN WOMEN takes a huge role in empowering the Indian women. Departed from various issues encountered by Indian women; domestic violence, adolescence, education, also the other public access for women; UN Women had underpinned to resolve

the issue by empowering the Indian women. There are more schools attended by girls and also communities run by women in India. Or, Sushma Swaraj would probably be the best example of the women's representation in Indian's politics. She served as a member of parliament for the sixth term and was the leader of opposition in the 15th *Lok Sabha*. She recently takeholds as the leader of Union Minister Of External Affairs of India. Sushma was the second person to handle this position after Indira Gandhi. Women's achievement in India has been developed, once because of the avocation from the external party; UN WOMEN; which empowers the goals of every country for their women, including United Arab Emirates.

The traditional belief in Arab countries had somehow constructed a consensus that women had never been better to express themselves anywhere except inside their houses. The condition had somehow degraded the rights of women to pursue their own dreams. Women's role that is limited, especially in vital sectors in their home countries such as economics, labor force and political participation in most of Arab states, somehow unveils the Arab gender issues, particularly in the level of supporting women empowerment that is low. As women's roles were limited, the situation showed almost no significant appearance of women's performances under the circumstances.

Being under the patriarchal rules, women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) seems to encounter their own anxiety. Although the respective state's government had worked to elevate the quality of its economy, politics, social and security, Emirati women are still undergoing a transition, as their society is exposed to foreign influence, adapts to changing identities while protecting cultural and religious tradition. Their rights to equality which remains performing a degradation has had the situation forced several prominent international institutions and organizations whose concern towards women to then initiate the women empowerment promotion in the Arab countries.

In 1975, UAE Women's Federation was successfully established under the initiation of Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, the first lady of the respective state's first leader. The establishment which best marked the intention of the United Arab Emirates to promote gender equality in the country brought Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak to the most influential women for political participation of women in the respective state, United Arab Emirates.

By 2004, the UAE's government performance in elevating other sectors for women's opportunity to pursue their dream was marked by many Emirati women who were offered a high-profile position in the government and business world. Unsurprisingly, restrictions still apply to some professions, and support for advancements in women's rights varies among the emirates. Moreover, societal and familial perceptions of a woman's proper role continue to perform a significant barrier to advancement. In the same year, United Arab Emirates had reportedly ratified several articles in the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as an action for women empowerment.

To add, the women's rights abuse in United Arab Emirates was reported in 2010. The Committee of International Federations for Human Rights (FIDH) highlighted numbers of principal concern which refers to women's discrimination before the law of UAE. Some of the issues started from the absence of the UAE's law about legal prohibition towards gender-based discriminations. Continued to the discrimination in marriage and family relations, violence against women (lack of protection against domestic violence, rape, female circumcision, also particular vulnerability of women migrant domestic workers), discrimination in other vital aspects; political, access to education, freedom to establish associations; also violation of freedom of movement.

Therefore, the importance of abolishing the gender inequality in Arab peninsula, particularly in the United Arab Emirates, in order to survive the international existence, also

to be the leader of global commerce, education and culture has come to urgent. Women's rights abuse is expected to be a wake-up call for United Arab Emirates to then step out of the door to make a change. As the United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s government strived to build a breakthrough by allowing gender equality promotion to live side-by-side with other prominent priorities of the state, UAE elevated its level of gender equality promotion as one of the very pioneer in Arab countries whose prominent support towards the change, proven by the achievement in ranked itself as a leader in gender equality in the Arab region, according to the World's Economic Forum's 2014 Global Gender Gap report. By examining the great achievement of the respective state in encouraging its women to take role in public sectors, UAE is furthermore working better to be the significant promotor of gender equality promotion, particularly in empowering women within the Arab region.

### **B. Research Question**

By examining the background, a question arose and it motivates the author to strive formulating a research question. The research question of this undergraduate thesis is:

*“How does the advocacy process of the International, state, and civil society actors to increase the women participation in the UAE parliament?”*

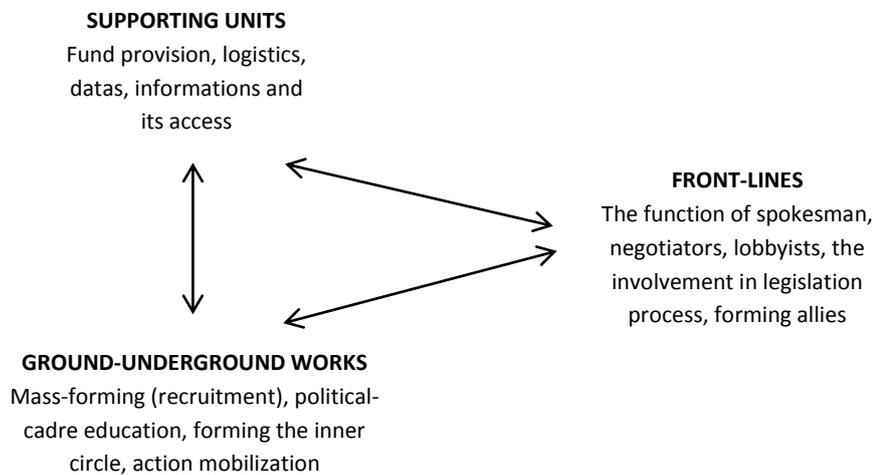
### **C. Theoretical Framework**

To answer the research question above, the author would like to use the advocacy structure by Dr. Nur Azizah, as the first step to distinguish the advocacy actors in international, national and civil society level.

<p><b>International organization and transnational civil society</b></p> <p>(International organizations, regional associations, transnational NGOs, and transnational networks among scholars, activists, and politicians)</p>
<p><b>State</b></p> <p>(National leaders, governing coalitions, parliamentary factions and judges at the national and local levels)</p>
<p><b>Civil society</b></p> <p>(Women’s movement organizations, cross-party alliances among women, and women’s sections inside political parties)</p>

Second, the author adds the model of advocacy by Roem Tomatimasang in Dr. Nur Azizah’s book, *Advokasi Kuota Perempuan di Indonesia*. This model is suitable to assist the author to find the answer for the research question, as the model is illustrated by Roem Tomatimasang below.

Advocacy model by Roem Tomatimasang



In the model of advocacy by Roem Tomatimasang, there are three main positions along with the tasks each position carries out. Front-liners would be very useful for the access to the executives of a state; government. By sending delegate, the related actor exercises a vital role to organize a visit, discussion and to later on study about the situation of the respective state. The output of the front-line position is hoped to lead the advocacy process in understanding the root's of the issue deeply.

When the initiator of the advocacy process successfully cooperates with the potential partners, Supporting Units would have to generate the next step. This position is very much attached with the fund supply, the initiative act of making some recommendations to the government, providing the access to information; women's rights, gender equality promotion, women and politics; and any other instruments needed.

Meanwhile, in the Ground-underground Works, the preparation is performed. This position has the legitimacy to seek for public affirmation. The ground-underground works may start a recruitment to find best agents of change, which would have to undergo certain mechanism that had been prepared by the initiator, including the obligation to educate the selected agents related to politics and social movement (for example) if necessary. A thorough preparation in the Ground-underground Works is expecting to shape the public opinion to be more aware towards certain issue and to exercise a practical advocacy.

Thus, the author of this undergraduate thesis believes that the model of advocacy by Roem Tomatimasang is best applied to the topic that is brought to the surface. Hopefully, this will lead to unfold a question to a proper answer.

## **D. Hypothesis**

To bring the women empowerment in United Arab Emirates in politics into reality, the advocacy actors are expected to do a set of actions to advocate the gender equality promotion in the country. Based on the advocacy model which is used by the author, the hypothesis encompasses actions that are involving:

- 1) The advocacy actors' contributions to open an access to the accurate data and information related to women's participation in the parliament of the United Arab Emirates.
- 2) The advocacy actors' contributions in raising the awareness and in shaping public opinion broadly towards women empowerment in politics through general meetings; conferences, conventions, annual sessions; also the effort to make some recommendations to influence the perspective of the UAE towards women in politics.
- 3) The advocacy actors' contributions in funding the needs of women empowerment in the United Arab Emirates.

## **E. Research Methods**

The research is conducted in both qualitative and quantitative methods. The author of this undergraduate thesis strives to collect the information and data through the journals, articles, reports, conference reports in which all have been undergo the studies from the experts and professionals. All of the data collected and processed by the author are classified as secondary data.

## **F. Discussion**

### **1. UAE Political System**

United Arab Emirates is ran by seven Rulers of each emirate, in which all of the rulers are on the Federal Supreme Council, the highest executive and legislative body. The UAE that has a unique sense of collaborating the tradition and modernity as the basic of running the Federate State also lead the country to build its own political system. The United Arab Emirates adopted both the Sharia Law and Civil Law at the same time that it drives the country to separate the religious value to adopt to its political system. The UAE's political system which is defined to be the traditional patriarchal style of leadership that is comprised of political loyalties structured around the country's various tribal elements causes an unspoken democracy within the United Arab Emirates.

In United Arab Emirates, there are five Federal Councils in which each carried out their own objectives and tasks:

#### ***Federal Supreme Council***

On the federal level, the Supreme Council (comprised of the rulers of each emirate) is the highest executive and legislative authority, ***“exercising supreme control upon the affairs of Union in general”*** —***Article 49 of the UAE Constitution***. The country's head of state is the ruler of Abu Dhabi, the largest among the seven emirates, in which becomes the central of the government affairs. The other six emirates, however, retain a certain amount of input in the decision-making process. The Federal Supreme Council appointed the head of state for a five-year term of administration.

### ***President and his Deputy***

Based on Article 45 of the UAE Constitution, President is the second of the five federal authorities. Following power of the President is to manage a meeting in the Federal Supreme Council. More powers of the President are basically to become the director of general meetings, either within the Supreme Council, meeting with The Federal Cabinet (if necessary), to sign any agreements, provisions, letter of diplomatic representation, also state regulations endorsed by the Supreme Council. Should a President appoint the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, and Diplomatic Representative for the foreign countries.

### ***Council of Ministers or the Cabinet***

The Cabinet is the executive branch of the federation. It executes all internal and external affairs of the Federation as per the provisions of both UAE Constitution and the federal laws. It works under the supervision of the President and the Federal Supreme Council. The Cabinet consists of Prime Minister, two Deputy Prime Ministers, Ministers of the UAE, one active Secretary General with numbers or personal to assist the conduct of its work. Currently, there are 29 members of The Cabinet, in which 8 of them are women. The average age of Cabinet Members is 38 years old, with the youngest age is 22 (Shamma bint Sohail Faris AlMazrui - Minister of State for Youth Affairs)

### ***Federal National Council***

The Federal National Council (FNC) is the consultative council, the parliamentary body of the UAE. The FNC is a member of the International Parliamentary Union (IPU), as well as the Arab Parliamentary Union (APU). It was formed as per the provisions of the UAE's Constitution. Its main functions as per Articles 89 to 92 include:

- passing, amending or rejecting federal draft laws including financial bills

- examining the Annual General Budget draft law and the draft law of the final accounts
- discussing international treaties and agreements
- discussing general subject pertaining to the affairs of the Federation and offering recommendations

FNC is now having 40 members, in which proportionate seats; Abu Dhabi and Dubai with 8; Sharjah and Ra's Al Khaimah with 6; Umm al-Quwain, Fujairah and Ajman with 4 seats.

### ***The Federal Judiciary***

The independence of the Emirati judiciary supports the country's stability and wellbeing. The UAE judiciary is entirely independent and judges are subject to no authority other than the rule of law and their conscience. Cases are handled by the UAE courts fairly and without interference from any power whatsoever. The UAE's Constitution and the President guarantee the value of the mission of justice and respect for judges and judicial bodies.

United Arab Emirates is a constitutional country in which explains the rules of political and constitutional organisation in the country. The Constitution demonstrates the main purpose of the establishment of the federation and its objectives at the local and regional levels. The UAE Constitution guarantee all UAE citizens the equal rights and opportunities, safety and security, also social justice.

## **2. Women in Parliament**

One of the most important roles of women in the UAE is their political representation in the country. This representation is expected to be the very promotor towards gender equality within the Emirates border. The engagement of Emirati women in politics becomes much

prestigious and is advocated by many, including the UN WOMEN, which the most importantly by the government. A recognition for women to get themselves involved in male-dominated arena only added the proof that women in the UAE begins to strengthen their roles in a very vital sector, aside from the education, economy and business. The author of this undergraduate thesis previously mentioned that Emirati women had performed an impressive participation in the election held by the FNC in 2006. A historical milestone scored by the Emirati women had elevated their quality to later on compete equally with men candidates in the national political arena, in which the women candidates were equally capable of running effective campaigns. Though, they were only permitted to have half of the candidates as their choice, while the rest candidates were more influential under the ruling families' authority.

In a total of 67 or 25.1 per cent of parliamentary chambers across the world, women now represent more than 30 per cent of the membership. A slightly higher percentage of upper houses (27.6%) include more than 30 per cent women, compared to single or lower houses (24.1%). Following elections in 2015 to single or lower houses, two countries returned to the prestigious 30% + group (United Republic of Tanzania and Switzerland), while five were included for the first time (Ethiopia, Trinidad and Tobago, El Salvador, Portugal and Sudan). Both parliamentary chambers in Ethiopia and in Trinidad and Tobago reached the 30%+ milestone. Surprisingly, none of the countries mentioned the achievement of the Arab states, particularly the United Arab Emirates, to enlist one of the 30% + group.

### **3. The Advocacy Process of the International, State and Civil Society Actors**

#### **a. UN Women**

The international meeting held by the United Nations had successfully received a tremendous feedback from the respective state, United Arab Emirates. To take the action very seriously, the UAE had launched its statement through the *Permanent Mission of the United Arab*

*Emirates to the United Nations*, where the federation has fully recognized and been very supportive towards the United Nations HeforShe campaign. The support was shown by the United Arab Emirates as its Foreign Minister, His Highness Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, was the very first foreign minister in the Arab world to sign onto such initiative.

In order to support the role of Emirati women in political sector, UN Women along with the Government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) committed to the opening of the new UN Women Liaison Office for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Abu Dhabi. The agreement was signed in 2016 between the Assistant Minister of Legal Affairs for the State of Abu Dhabi and the Deputy Executive Director of the UN Women.

In November 2014, UN Women along with the European Commission, and the European Parliament arranged a two-days conference in Brussels with the title '*Spring Forward for Women Conference*' which brought together the Arab lawmakers and Members of the European Parliament. The intention of the conference is to support the women empowerment in political realm, as well as he opportunity to share their experiences in advancing the gender equality and women's empowerment within the Arab states and European Union.

## **b. UAE Government**

### ***Federal Supreme Council***

The Federal Supreme Council as the highest federal entity had recognized and has been very supportive towards the women's role in the national development. The provisions in the UAE Constitution that all citizens are equal before the law, without distinction between citizens of the Union in regard to race, nationality, religious belief or social status, has been a challenge of the UAE Government entity that this provision encounters criticism regarding to the provision that excluded the 'gender'. Regardless, the government along with the citizens are

working hard to bring the provision into reality. It has been working hard in applying the provision ever since it was coined as a part of the UAE Constitution, proven by the entrance of the Emirati women in the government sector since 2006.

The Prime Minister's brilliant idea has given birth to the establishment of the UAE Gender Balance Council in 2015, which has put the respective state to the first to own Gender Balance Council in the Arab region.

### ***Gender Balance Council***

The President of the GBC had her statement very clear to then drafting the framework for the council and as soon as possible introduce the needs of women empowerment as well as narrowing the gender gap in the respective state, the United Arab Emirates. In order to enlarge the opportunity for Emirati women to take role in the government sector, the UAE Gender Balance Council has announced its initiative in establishing the *Gender Balance Index*. The Gender Balance Index in government entities aims at measuring the performance of these entities in achieving balance through a series of indices which include developing policies in support of women, applying these policies optimally, ensuring equal opportunities between men and women in leadership positions and decision-making positions as well as launching initiatives that will provide excellent services in the workplace, such as, creating women's committees that serve women.

### ***Federal National Council***

Federal National Council is the only electoral body in the federation's entity. The very milestone for women in the United Arab Emirates was in the 2006 election by the Federal National Council. Eleven years ago was the first time for women to run a political campaign and signed themselves as a candidate in the national election.

Federal National Council had experienced a very well progress in introducing women's role in political representation, proven by the increasing of the percentage of women in the parliament for the next two elections since 2006. In 2006, women covered 17.5 per cent in the parliament, and it elected nine out of 40 FNC members. Since the United Arab Emirates have had a commitment to expand the political participation of the citizens in a measured and sustained way, the next FNC election in 2011 showed the increasing numbers of the Electoral College members, from only around 6,995 voters in 2006 (in which did not cover even 1% from the whole UAE citizens) to 135,308 voters.

By 2015, 78 out of 252 candidates were women, as well as the increasing numbers of voters up to 224,279 which covered 66 per cent increase. This had been another success for the Federal National Council in its task to increase women's participation in politics. The increasing numbers in national elections for the last three periods has been the very achievement of the United Arab Emirates in advocating the Emirati women in politics, in which was started by allowing women to run as candidates since the FNC's first election in 2006.

Women successfully ran as candidates and performed an effective political campaign at that time, as well as the 2015 election, Naama Al Sharhan from Ras Al Khaimah was the only woman who was elected directly to pickup 1,400 voters. This has remarked the positive outcome from the government's provision along with the UAE's commitment to empower women, particularly in political representation. The appointment by the Supreme Council of Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi as the permanent speaker for the Federal National Council since 2015 had succeeded the UAE's effort to empower the Emirati women in politics. Especially, knowing that Amal Al Qubaisi is the first woman in the history of the United Arab Emirates, as well as the Arab region to hold such honorable position within a women representation in a high government sector.

### **c. UAE's General Women's Union**

#### ***GWU's National Strategy for the Advancement of Women***

The joint-program with the UNDP, The United Nations Development Fund for Women and several local government agencies and NGOs had drawn the UNDP to publish an Executive report on the program in 2007. The report confirmed the joint program, as well as the recognition for the General Women's Union as the leading partnership in implementing this program, particularly in the gender mainstreaming, as well as the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The joint program had resulted to the proposal from the UNDP to the respective state, United Arab Emirates, in gender mainstreaming, especially in political participation. The UNDP stipulated in the draft-country that although gender mainstreaming is still perceived under governance, UNDP would support the national priority of empowering women to contribute to the economic, social and political spheres. In addition, the UNDP would recommend the implementation of independent activities to raise the awareness and capacity for gender mainstreaming.

#### ***GWU Workshop on National Gender Gap Report***

In accordance with the United Nation's Development Programme (UNDP), gender gap report is very essential in completing the efforts of a state to gender balance study. Also, seeing that report would be the achievement of the development program in the social studies of the UAE in empowering women. From such significant reason, the UAE's General Women Union has organized a workshop on national gender gap report at its headquarters in Abu Dhabi. The workshop was one of the executions of the GWU's Strategy for

Empowerment of Emirati Women in the UAE 2015-2021 in strengthening the role of women in both regional and international arena.

Noura Al Suwaidi, the Director-General of the General Women's Union, stated in her interview with WAM (UAE National News Agency), that the union cooperates with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to prepare the national report about the gender gap with the aim of identifying the proper measurement to gender advancement as well as to strengthen the country's competitiveness in related international reports.

Still in Noura's words, the goals of the workshop is to find a systematic framework to prepare periodic international reports related to women's rights and advancement, completing the UAE's intense efforts in the field of gender balance that aim to achieve pioneering in the participation and empowerment of the Emirati woman in the journey of sustainable development. She then added that the report represents a quantitative study on the social gender gap, which benefits the monitoring and evaluation of these efforts.

## **G. Conclusion**

In mainstreaming the gender equality for the future of women, the advocacy by international, state and civil society actors is highly needed. In this undergraduate thesis, the author had chosen UN Women, UAE Government, and UAE's General Women's Union. Numbers of action for supports towards encouraging the UAE in increasing women's representation in political realm, particularly in the parliaments, has been exercised by the three main actors. Partnerships, provisions and recommendations, as well as publications have been among the process.

The UAE has been working on elevating its achievements in gender mainstreaming. The respective state ranked second in the Arab region as the most improved states in empowering

women as the form of implementing the gender equality promotion. The UAE has also been the very pioneer of the country which has the only Gender Balance Council within the region.

Advocacy is all about the process, in which the results are often beyond the expectation. The fact that UAE remains exercising the sheikhdom and hereditary rules, it has never been easy to address the recommendations in terms of criticism, or it has never been easy to influence the government. The UAE nurtures the political stability with the responsibility is taken care by the relatives. As the advocacy process is still ongoing, the UAE goals to achieve gender equality in the possible near future.

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