

UNPACKING MARRIAGEABILITY



This knowledge product unpacks the concept of ‘marriageability’ as it relates to child marriage. The More Than Brides Alliance learning project has made this report possible. Additional publications related to addressing girls’ sexual and reproductive health and rights and the root causes of child marriage can be found in our online resource library: <https://morethanbrides.org/mmwwk/library/>.

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‘MARRIAGEABILITY’ ACROSS SETTINGS WHERE CHILD MARRIAGE IS COMMON

Once the girl has reached marriageable age, a suitor will be found...

In our tradition, girls are cut to ensure their marriageability...

If marriage is delayed, the girl risks becoming spoilt and unmarriageable...

What do we mean when we say ‘marriageable’?

The term ‘**marriageability**’ is used frequently in marriage literature and child marriage discourse; however, it is rarely defined. For girls living in countries with high child marriage rates, marriageability may reference the physical changes during puberty that signal girls’ transition to ‘womanhood’. Otherwise, marriageability might be informed by characteristics or skills seen as desirable in a spouse. These might include physical beauty, an agreeable disposition, religious piety, relationship skills (e.g., conflict management), or traits associated with human capital (e.g., education).

This brief offers a framework for understanding different characteristics of ‘marriageability’ and the different levels at which norms related to marriageability are reinforced. We review evidence from interviews with child marriage programme implementers in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Malawi, Mali, Nepal, Niger, Uganda, and Pakistan to explore similarities and differences in what makes girls considered ‘marriageable’ and who may be exerting pressure on girls to marry before their perceived marriageability declines. **Examining context-specific concerns linked to marriageability has important implications for programmes aiming to change social norms that accelerate marriage for girls in places where child marriage is common.**

Dowry and Bride Price

Marriageability may refer to a girl’s ‘value’ on the marriage market. To help measure or assess her value, we may consider the financial transactions associated with the marriage. We found that interviewees mentioned these transactions when talking about marriageability. Here, we take a closer look at how financial transactions may influence or indicate marriageability.

DOWRY refers to the money or in-kind items transferred **from the bride’s family to the groom’s family** at the time of marriage.

BRIDE PRICE refers to the money or in-kind items transferred **from the groom’s family to the bride’s family** at the time of marriage.

The value of dowry or bride price may be influenced by factors such as her age and her perceived desirability. A programme implementer from Nepal notes that as girls age, dowry expectations increase. So parents marry girls younger because it is more affordable:

If we go to Terai region, we can see the trend of child marriage due to dowry. The more the girl’s age the parents have to pay more dowry.
- Programme implementer from Nepal

Bride price also influences marriage timing as families need to consider what is in the best interest of all of the children. As we heard in Uganda, girls may get married early to garner enough bride price for their brothers to also get married:

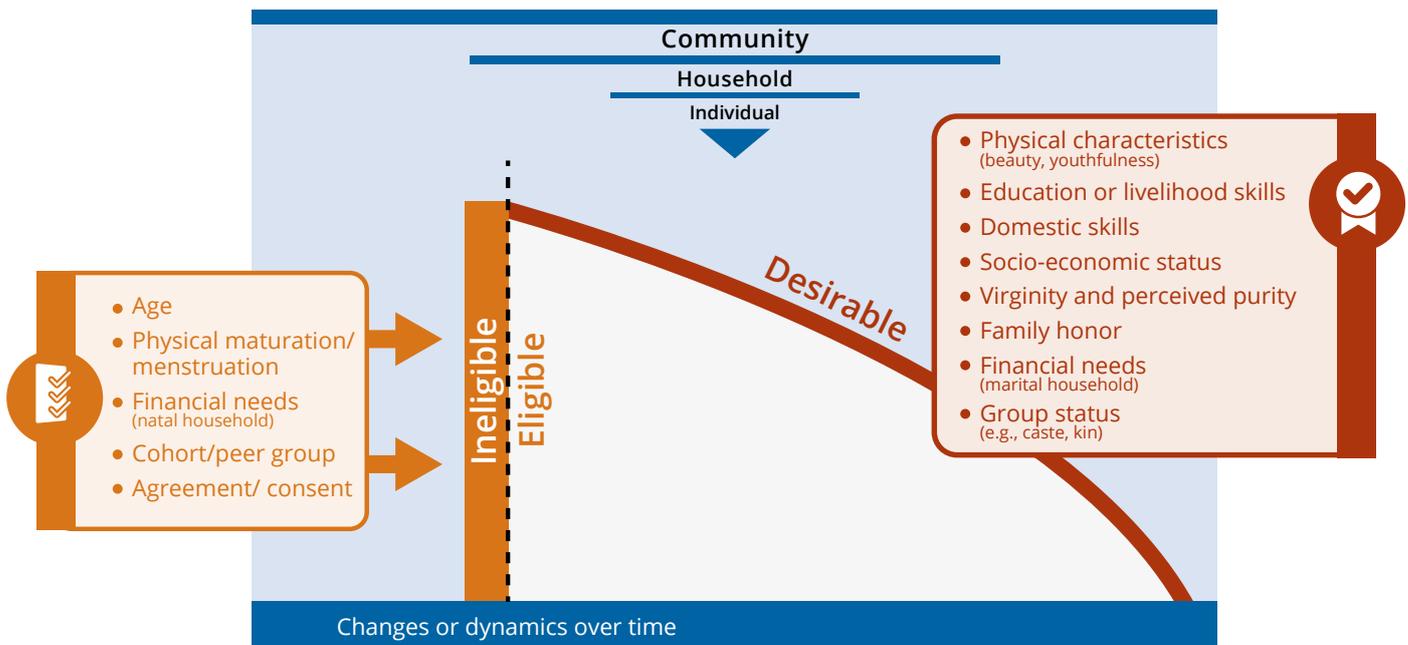
Girls are seen as a solution to poverty, leading to early marriages. Some are married off just to raise the bride price for their elder brothers who are intending to marry.- Uganda



A framework for understanding 'marriageability'

'Marriageability' often relates to two main domains: **eligibility for marriage** and **desirability on the marriage market**. Figure 1 (below) shows various factors that may be valued in certain settings when determining whether or not a girl is eligible for marriage and factors influencing her desirability on the marriage market once she is considered eligible.

Figure 1: The different characteristics of marriageability reflect a theorised definition of the term based on research, input from workshop participants, and data from interviews with programme implementers.



Readiness for marriage or eligibility to be married

Figure 1 (above) illustrates characteristics that signal **eligibility** for marriage and demonstrates that perceived eligibility implies a threshold, before which a girl is ineligible. **But what do we mean by 'eligible'?**

Based on the limited literature on this topic, interviews with key informants across nine countries, and secondary data, we categorise 'readiness' as a combination of physical factors, family needs, and norms around marriage age and peer marital status.

Individual factors, including age and physical maturation, can determine whether a community considers a girl to have reached an eligible marriage age. Familial factors can also influence whether a girl is considered eligible for marriage. A family in financial need might rely on their daughter's early marriage to reduce household expenses, to offset potentially higher dowry costs of older brides, or to enable them to pay a bride price to secure marriage for their sons. In some contexts, girls of specific age groups are traditionally married in cohorts during the same marriage season, influencing community-level perceptions of when girls are eligible for marriage. Figure 2 (below) provides example quotes for each characteristic of eligibility.

Figure 2: Illustrative examples of characteristics of eligibility. Quotes come from More Than Brides Alliance qualitative research (with adolescent girls and parents of adolescent girls) and interviews conducted with child marriage programme implementers.

ELIGIBILITY	AGE	If a girl is regarded as getting old - let's say she's, she's 20 -, she's considered old in that community, and they, her parents, would fear that nobody would marry her thinking that she is getting older. - Ethiopia
	PHYSICAL MATURATION	After they become mature, we need to think about their marriage. At 16-17, 18-19 years of age they become mature or big. - India
	FINANCIAL NEED (NATAL FAMILY)	I was protesting but my parents did not listen... I did not like the groom as he was much older than me. I had told my family that I want continue my studies. But my family was saying the family is very good, rich, and they will allow me to continue my studies. 'They will always make you happy' my parents said...I did not agree, and only became convinced after one month. - Bangladesh
	COHORT/PEER GROUP	<i>Interviewer:</i> Does the fact that other girls of the same age are getting married influence parents' decisions about their daughters' marriages? <i>Respondent:</i> Of course! Because your friends are married, you also - if you find a husband - you have to get married. - Niger
	AGREEMENT/CONSENT	But in our times, it's the girl herself who chooses her husband. If we [mothers] agree, we show our approval. If we do not agree, we protest and show our dissatisfaction, but that will not cancel out the girl's choice. - Niger

Desirability on the marriage market

Under **desirability**, factors that may make a girl attractive to potential suitors, causing her to marry early, are grouped together. A girl's desirability may be affected by her physical attractiveness, reputation in the community, personality traits, level of education, work or domestic skills, or perceived sexual purity. For example, in high fertility settings, where women give birth to more children on average, puberty and physical fertility indicators may increase desirability as a spouse. In other settings, education and skills associated with income potential may be more appealing. The economic or social standing of a girl's family may also influence perceptions of her desirability. Financial needs or needs related to domestic and caretaking responsibilities within a girl's marital home may cause pressure on a son to marry an eligible girl. Furthermore, a girl considered able to competently take on domestic responsibilities may be seen as a more desirable candidate. In settings where older girls require the payment of a higher dowry, household-level economic considerations may accelerate the timing of a girl's marriage. Where bride price is practised, families may have their daughters married early to get the money required to secure their son's marriages. Where social norms favour early marriage, delaying marriage may create anxiety that a girl who remains unmarried may attract fewer or less desirable marital prospects in the future. Figure 3 (below) provides quotes illustrating various characteristics of desirability in the marriage market.

Figure 3: Illustrative examples of characteristics of desirability on the marriage market. Quotes come from More Than Brides Alliance qualitative research (with adolescent girls and parents of adolescent girls) and interviews conducted with child marriage programme implementers.

DESIRABILITY	PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS	In our rural communities, young girls get more proposals. In older age, proposals come less frequently for girls. So they have a fear that if they get old, they will not find a good match. It is all attached to their bodies, beauty, and youthfulness. People have a perception that girl lose their sex appeal with every passing year, so people have these types of fears. – Pakistan
	EDUCATION OR LIVELIHOOD SKILLS	We are giving her education because the [groom's] relatives will come and ask how educated the girl is... so then we can say that our daughter is educated this much, so [dowry] will cost less. – India
	DOMESTIC SKILLS	[A good wife] is always the one who takes good care of her husband, preparing the bed and the food. – Niger
	SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS	In the case of girls, the financial solvency of their parents is the main factor. They have to get married as soon as possible, if their parents are financially solvent. In the case of boys, they get married only after they can earn enough money to buy gold. – Bangladesh
	VIRGINITY AND PERCEIVED PURITY	At the time of marriage, girls are expected to be a virgin otherwise her marriageability decreases. – Ethiopia
	FAMILY HONOUR	Cultural and social norms also dictate that once girls are grown (characterised say by breast development) they should be married off immediately before they get 'spoilt' (commence sexual relations or get pregnant). – Uganda
	FINANCIAL NEED	All boys used to demand money... they said if you give more money, then we can marry with your daughter... they have big dreams, and they said they want to have that much money. – India
	GROUP STATUS (E.G., CASTE, KIN)	The girl when she enters into a [kinship] marriage, she has to be the one to consolidate family ties with her in-laws. – Mali

Marriageability characteristics are not just individually based

Characteristics that influence a girl's eligibility and desirability for marriage may relate directly to the girl herself, but may also include:

- **Her family's traits or circumstances;**
- **Influences within her peer group; or**
- **Community-level expectations.**

Typically, a girl may be considered eligible for marriage once she has reached a certain age or level of physical maturation. However, if her family is in financial need or others in her peer group are married, economic and social pressures may lead to her being considered eligible before reaching the conventional 'marriageable age'.

Therefore a girl's desirability is multi-factorial and may relate closely to her virginity or personal characteristics. It may also be associated with her family's socioeconomic position and how suitors and their families perceive them. Additionally, pressure from the family and/or community regarding her age and/or readiness can bring forward her marriage.

What's sex got to do with it?

In many societies with high rates of child marriage, **the most powerful factors influencing perceptions of marriageability relate to girls' sexuality.** In particular, high value is placed on girls' premarital virginity and the perceived threat posed by girls' sexuality to their families' reputation and honour. When premarital sex is seen as a threat to a girl's marriageability, parents prioritise having their daughters married before they become sexually active. **The perceived reputational threat posed by a girl's nascent sexuality can pressure parents to have their daughters married early to prevent them from engaging in premarital sex.**

In contexts where premarital sex is considered strictly counter-normative and connected to the girl and her family's honour, as soon as girls are perceived as capable of engaging in sexual activity, they become eligible for marriage. This perception sometimes connects to their physical development or behaviour (i.e., being viewed as promiscuous or attracting sexual attention).

In contexts where premarital sex is highly stigmatised for girls, premarital sexual activity or pregnancy are considered a serious threat to girls' marriageability. In settings with high rates of child marriage, where premarital sex among girls is more socially accepted, girls who become pregnant are often pressured to marry their sexual partner quickly to ensure the child is born and raised within marriage. If a marriage does not occur, having a child outside of wedlock impacts the girl or woman's marriageability.

Programmes addressing sexuality-related dimensions of marriageability

A framework to understand marriageability may be useful for programmes working to eliminate child marriage. If programmes understand which specific qualities make a girl considered eligible or desirable for marriage, they may be able to more effectively target interventions to change the way those qualities are perceived.

Programmes aiming to delay marriage for girls often address the dimensions of eligibility or desirability that are not related to sexuality. For example, some programmes provide cash transfers or other financial assistance to families to offset the financial demands that push girls to be considered marriageable at an early age. Asset-building programmes that provide life skills training and education to girls may help girls acquire skills valued on the marriage market, minimising anxiety related to girls' desirability. This gives girls and their families more bargaining power to delay marriage without feeling that they are risking their futures. Some programmes with families, particularly fathers, have tried to address families and fathers' roles in child marriage by suggesting ways to reduce the practice.

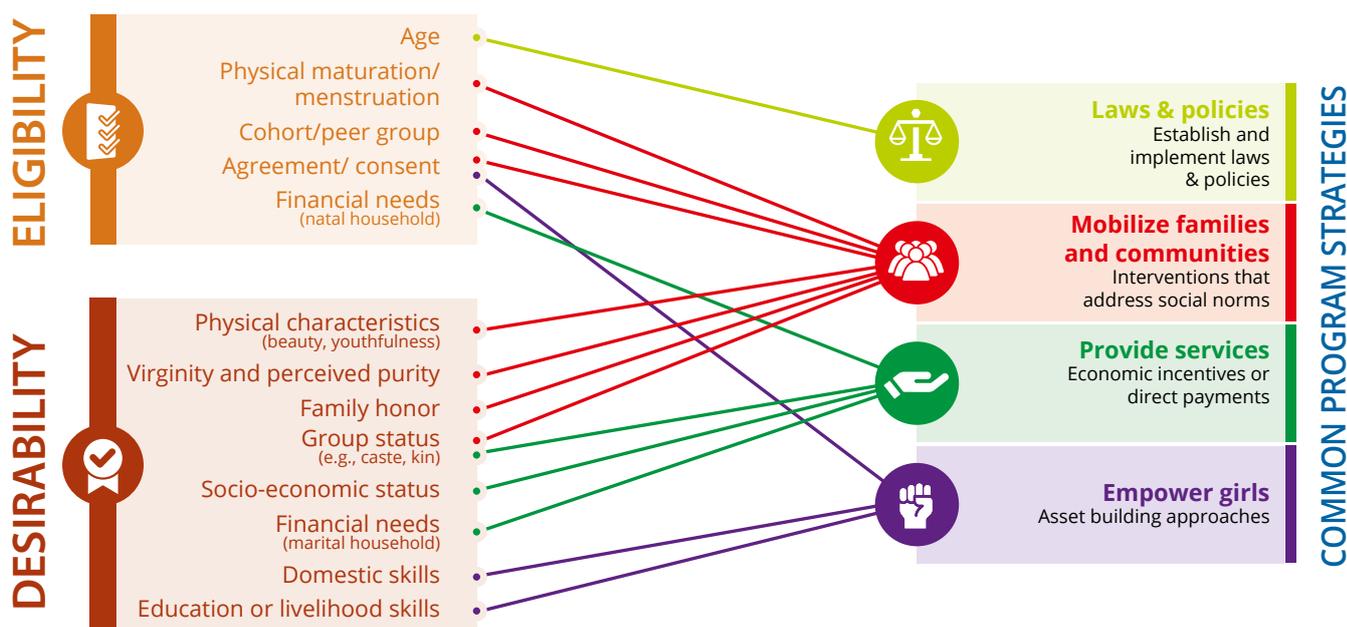


But how do programmes address the characteristics of marriageability that are so closely related to girls' adolescent sexuality? Research conducted with adolescent girls and their parents in programme countries along with insights shared by programme implementers demonstrates the centrality of girls' sexuality to their perceived marriageability. Often, the norms underpinning these characteristics are among the most difficult to change. Programmes cannot directly address physical characteristics related to marriageability. However, programmes can work at the family and community levels to shift norms that understand menstruation and physical maturation as signs of marriage eligibility. (For more detail on the challenges and opportunities involved in working with parents, see knowledge products on this topic, available in the [More Than Brides Alliance resource library](#)).

Using the general framework for interventions proposed by the Girls Not Brides [theory of change](#), we mapped the characteristics of marriageability against common intervention approaches to understand how these characteristics lend themselves to 'typical' child marriage interventions. Furthermore, this was used to illuminate whether or not these approaches are (in)adequate when addressing key characteristics that sustain the practice.

Figure 4 (below) proposes how these characteristics would typically be addressed in child marriage programmes, based on our understanding of these programmes from systematic reviews, including Chae and Ngo,¹ Kalamar et al.,² Lee-Rife et al.,³ and Malhotra and Elnakib.⁴

Figure 4: Aspects of marriageability addressed by child marriage programs



As Figure 4 shows, most interventions related to the characteristics of marriageability address social norms and are grouped under the umbrella strategy of 'mobilising families and communities'. Unfortunately, programmes focusing on mobilising families and communities to reduce child marriage have produced less rigorous evidence than programmes focused on other strategies, such as cash transfers. Therefore, they are under-represented in available systematic reviews, and there is less evidence about the specific social norms addressed through those interventions and how they relate to child marriage. We argue that the marriageability framework offered here may help practitioners identify specific attitudes and norms affecting when girls marry and design specific interventions to address them. Activity A (below) guides practitioners through a reflection aimed at doing just that.

Applying the Marriageability Framework in Program Design: An Exercise for Practitioners

This exercise guides practitioners to analyse what influences marriageability in their context, which aspects can be acted upon and reflect on how programmatic interventions may better address marriageability.

STEP 1

What influences marriageability in your context?

During the design stage of your programme, use the following questions to consider what influences a girl's marriageability in your context:

- | Questions | Example responses |
|--|--|
| <p>1. What makes a girl considered to be eligible for marriage in this community?</p> | <p>In this community, girls are considered eligible for marriage once they have begun menstruating. At that time, parents start looking for a partner for their daughter out of fear that if they wait, their daughter could lose her virginity, which would bring shame to the family and decrease her chances of finding a good husband in the future.</p> |
| <p>2. What makes a girl more desirable as a marriage partner in this community?</p> | <p>In this community, the most desirable girls are from good families, are 'pure', have some education and domestic skills, and are obedient.</p> |

STEP 2

Which marriageability aspects are most important and actionable?

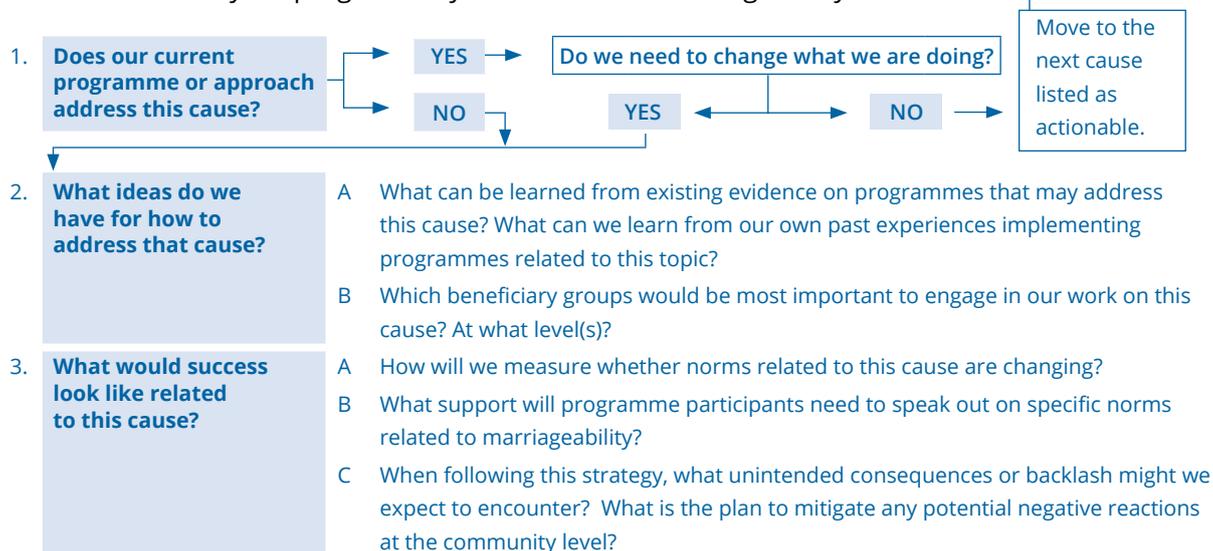
List the different factors generated by the previous two questions and examine each cause that makes a girl eligible and/or desirable for marriage. Taking the responses from the above two questions evaluate the influence and actionability of each cause.



STEP 3

Reflect on your interventions.

For causes listed as 'actionable', discuss each of the following questions to reflect on how your program may better address marriageability



Conclusion:

We offer this framework to examine specific child marriage drivers and their underlying norms in order to determine actionable components for interventions that aim to delay marriage for girls. This framework and its related exercise may help practitioners focus on the specificities of wider child marriage drivers and identify things to start doing, stop doing, or do differently in their programmes. While 'poverty' and 'social norms' are often cited as key drivers of child marriage, examining salient components of marriageability can help illuminate how social norms and poverty interact to accelerate marriage for girls in different contexts. For example, where bride prices are practised, puberty is a marker for marriage eligibility, and there is a high social cost associated with girls' premarital sex. Poverty may cause parents to feel especially anxious about the risks associated with their daughter's declining bride price and marital prospects if she waits to marry or if she ends up having premarital sex, which increases pressure to agree to child marriage. Programmatic approaches that go beyond cash transfers and general awareness-raising about the harms of child marriage and work towards including strategies that target specific notions about what makes a girl eligible for marriage or more desirable on the marriage market may be promising. Cash transfers may prove unsustainable and general awareness-raising may not be effective at disrupting powerful social norms supportive of child marriage, particularly where communities are already largely aware of the risks. The characteristics of marriageability might constitute an important starting point for conversations about marital decision-making and pressures for girls to marry early. Each actionable cause may be addressed separately within the same intervention for maximum impact.



Start doing:

- Critically reflect on how factors influencing perceptions of girls' eligibility and desirability for marriage contribute to driving child marriage where you work. Practitioners may use the proposed framework to identify specific attitudes and norms that influence marriage timing for girls and develop strategies to address these.
- Acknowledge the key role that sexuality plays in influencing perceptions about marriageability and marriage timing for girls. Plan for potential pushback from parents and others in the community when addressing taboo topics.
- Use the above exercise (in Box A) to identify the actionable causes of marriageability and develop strategies to address these causes specifically.
- Use factors related to girls' eligibility and desirability for marriage as starting points for conversations about marital decision-making and pressures for girls to marry early within programmes (with programme beneficiaries themselves).



Do differently:

- Go beyond social norms interventions focused on raising awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage, girls' rights, or the importance of keeping girls in school to engage girls, families, and communities in dialogue about specific norms that shape perceptions of a girl's eligibility or desirability for marriage. Examine which of these elements could be modified to better protect girls' wellbeing in the present and the future.
- Address each actionable cause of marriageability separately to spark critical discussion about how factors interact, rather than talking about social norms favouring child marriage more broadly.



Stop doing:

- Advocacy or community sensitisation campaigns denouncing child marriage and the harms it causes in areas where most community members are already aware of the risks associated with child marriage. Instead, identify specific characteristics shaping perceptions of girls' marriageability and pressuring families to have their daughters married early in a particular community, and integrate messages related to these ideas into sensitisation campaigns.

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