



# TIPPING POINT SOCIAL NORMS INNOVATIONS SERIES

**Brief 7: Raksha Bandhan  
NEPAL**



# TIPPING POINT SOCIAL NORMS INNOVATIONS SERIES

## BANGLADESH

### Amader Kotha

Adolescents use street drama and dialogue to challenge existing social norms and show positive alternatives.

### Football for Girls

Read about how girls participation in sports is changing social norms in some parts of Bangladesh.

### Amrao Korchi

Girls and boys switch roles to challenge gendered social norms, where boys do household work usually done by girls (cooking, doing laundry, etc).

### Tea Stall Conversations

Men gather to drink tea and discuss gender roles, girls rights, and child, early, and forced marriage with each other.

## NEPAL

### Cooking Competition

Boys compete in a cooking competition and girls judge their food.

### Intergenerational Dialogue

Communication gap between adolescents and their parents is bridged in order to better understand adolescent's aspirations.

### Raksha Bandhan

The traditional ritual of a sister tying a thread around a brother's wrist and asking him for protection is modified where brothers also tie a thread around their sisters' wrist and both vow to practice gender equality and pursue their dreams.

### Street Drama

Girls and boys perform street dramas to challenge social norms around dowry and early marriage, and introduce the benefits of investing in girls.





## BACKGROUND

Research and experience show that social change toward gender justice requires more than supportive attitudes and awareness among individuals.<sup>1</sup> People do not exist as islands; they make up a social system that is interdependent and built on tacit conventions of behavior. What people believe others do, what they think others expect from them, and what people believe the consequences of nonconformance to be—these are dimensions of social norms that play a tremendous part in determining people’s actions and choices, even when an individual has knowledge and attitudes that would suggest a different choice.

Change for gender justice requires more than sharing knowledge and promoting equitable attitudes of individuals. It also requires a society in which people’s support for gender justice becomes as normal and accepted as removing your shoes indoors or paying respect to your elders is in many parts of Asia. So then, how does one engage with social environments to shift what is considered ‘normal’?

The Tipping Point<sup>2</sup> initiative, which aims to promote positive alternatives to child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) for girls in Bangladesh and Nepal, has taken up this question as a core part of its work. From 2015 to 2017, the project built on findings from its **Community Participatory Analysis (CPA) Study** to identify ways to drive social norms change that transforms the root causes of CEFM. This brief is part of a series highlighting Tipping Point programming innovations based on key design principles for social norms work, which CARE developed based on the existing academic and gray literature.<sup>3</sup> These innovations complement a broader suite of activities to facilitate the agency and options of adolescent girls, working with girls, boys, parents, key formal and informal influencers, and local decision makers.<sup>4</sup>

1 Heise, L. & Manji, K. (2016). Social Norms. GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack no. 31. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham

2 For more information on Tipping Point and partners, visit [https://caringpoint.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/care\\_tipping-point\\_web.pdf](https://caringpoint.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/care_tipping-point_web.pdf)

3 Bicchieri, C. (2006). *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.; Bicchieri, C., Lindemans, J., & Jiang, T. (2014). *A structured approach to a diagnostic of collective practices*. *Front. Psychol.* 5:1418;. Mackie, G., Moneti, F., Shakya, H. & Denny, E. (2015). *What are social norms? How are they measured?* California, USA: UNICEF/Centre on Global Justice, University of San Diego

4 See the full Theory of Change for the programming of Tipping Point here: <https://caringpoint.org/innovation/theory-of-change-2/>

## DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR SOCIAL NORMS PROGRAMMING

To guide and inform its work, Tipping Point distilled 8 design principles for engaging with social norms change, drawing from academic and gray literature on the topic. These include:

1. **Find early adopters:** Often, people are already living their lives in positive ways that support girls' choices and opportunities. Find them.
2. **Build support groups of early adopters:** It can be hard to embody positive, rights-based change alone. Groups help individuals support, encourage and trouble-shoot.
3. **Use future-oriented positive messages:** Help people imagine positive alternatives. Change is possible.
4. **Open space for dialogue:** Get people talking to each other about new ideas. Challenge the implicit assumptions that everyone holds the same views, experiences and preferences.
5. **Facilitate public debate:** Engage publicly with community members to debate on what is OK in this context.
6. **Expect by-stander action:** Move from envisioning possibilities of justice to action. This involves building community and accountability, so that people show up for girls' rights in their words and actions.
7. **Show examples of positive behavior in public:** Demonstrate that the positive shift we hope for already exists. And it is totally normal.
8. **Map allies and ask for their support:** Identify the resources and networks we need to support positive change for individuals, families and communities.



# THE INNOVATION: RAKSHA BANDHAN

In many rural villages of Nepal, girls have very limited power to shape their own futures. Key decisions such as how long to stay in school and when and whom to marry are predominantly made by their families. Often, their brothers have more say in their lives than they do. At the same time, brothers are expected to ‘protect’ sisters from shameful situations, which often means controlling girls’ behavior and mobility in public. Brothers have the power to grant or deny permission for a girl to leave the house, and they often accompany their sisters on outings.

Raksha Bandhan is a festival celebrating the bond between brothers and sisters in Hindu communities in Nepal. In a ceremony at home, a sister ties a *rakhi* (a colored thread) on her brother’s wrist. As she does so, she prays for his long life and asks him to offer her protection. The brother responds with an oath to protect his sister. The Tipping Point team saw the potential of reshaping this ritual to emphasize equality between sisters and brothers.

On reflection, groups of adolescent girls and boys saw that Raksha Bandhan, as traditionally practiced, reinforced patriarchal norms of male protectorship and heroism, along with female supplication. To challenge these, they organized a **public version of the holiday** in a central place in the village, in which brothers also tied *rakhi* on their sisters’ wrists (**Design Principle 7**). In the exchange of *rakhis*, brothers and sisters shared ways that they could support each other, such as a brother helping with household chores so both he and his sister can make it to school on time. **Siblings promised each other friendship and solidarity** in the pursuit of their dreams (**Design Principle 6**).

After the ceremony, participants, parents, and village leaders held a **dialogue on the idea** that boys and girls could view each other as equals and support each other inside and outside the home (**Design Principle 4**). Girls shared their aspirations for continuing their education. Many brothers expressed their desire to have strong, supportive relationships with their sisters and reflected on changes they wanted to make to stand up for their sisters’ choices. In the weeks after, stories came out of actions boys had taken to support their sisters, such as a brother who gave his bicycle to his sister because her school was much further away than his. Boys were becoming **allies for girls’ rights** to make key decisions about their own lives (**Design Principle 6**).

The implementation guide at the end of this brief provides more information about the Raksha Bandhan activity.

## CARE SOCIAL NORMS ANALYSIS PLOT (SNAP) FRAMEWORK

SNAP was developed to measure the nature of specific social norms and their influence, and offers a useful framework to examine the initial reactions to a social norms focused activity. Specifically, it examines any preliminary effects on:

### EMPIRICAL EXPECTATIONS

What I think others do.

### NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS

What I think others expect me to do.

**SANCTIONS**  
Anticipated reactions of others whose opinions matter to me.

**SENSITIVITY TO SANCTIONS**  
How much sanctions matter for me.

**EXCEPTIONS**  
Under what situations is it acceptable to break the norms.

## What are the initial reactions of community members?

In its second year, the public Raksha Bandhan ceremony was well attended and even drew brother-sister dyads from surrounding villages without Tipping Point activities. Parents, teachers, and community leaders observed the event and participated in the discussion that followed. What impressions did they come away with regarding this new way of conducting Raksha Bandhan in which boys and girls were given equal roles?

Using inquiry questions based on **CARE's Social Norms Analysis Plot (SNAP) framework**<sup>1</sup> Tipping Point project staff interviewed nine community members—four women and four men whose immediate families had not been involved in Tipping Point activities and one 17-year-old adolescent girl who had previously attended some of the project's activities. Four respondents identified as Muslim, four as Hindu, and one did not identify her religion. Their ages ranged from 17-61 years. All but one had heard of Tipping Point, although two of them seemed to have misconceptions about the project.

1 Stefanik, L. & Hwang, T. (2017). *Applying theory to practice: CARE's journey piloting social norms measures for gender programming*. <http://gender.care2share.wikispaces.net/file/view/care-social-norms-paper-web.pdf>.

## LOVE AND COMMITMENT? YES.

Eight of the respondents had heard of the public Raksha Bandhan event, although only one witnessed it. Everyone agreed that fostering love and commitment between sisters and brothers—in both directions—and recognizing those bonds communally were good developments.

*I saw the Raksha Bandhan program. I liked it because before it didn't happen that way. The brothers and sisters fed each other sweets and exchanged love between them. I liked it very much. I liked it because they had a space to exchange love for each other and share their feelings between them.*

45-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

*It makes the brother accountable towards his duty. It makes him responsible when his sister is sad or is sick.*

24-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

*Before the norms and traditions were not good, and now it is changing. Both have the feeling of love and rights towards each other when both of them tie rakhi to each other.*

50-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

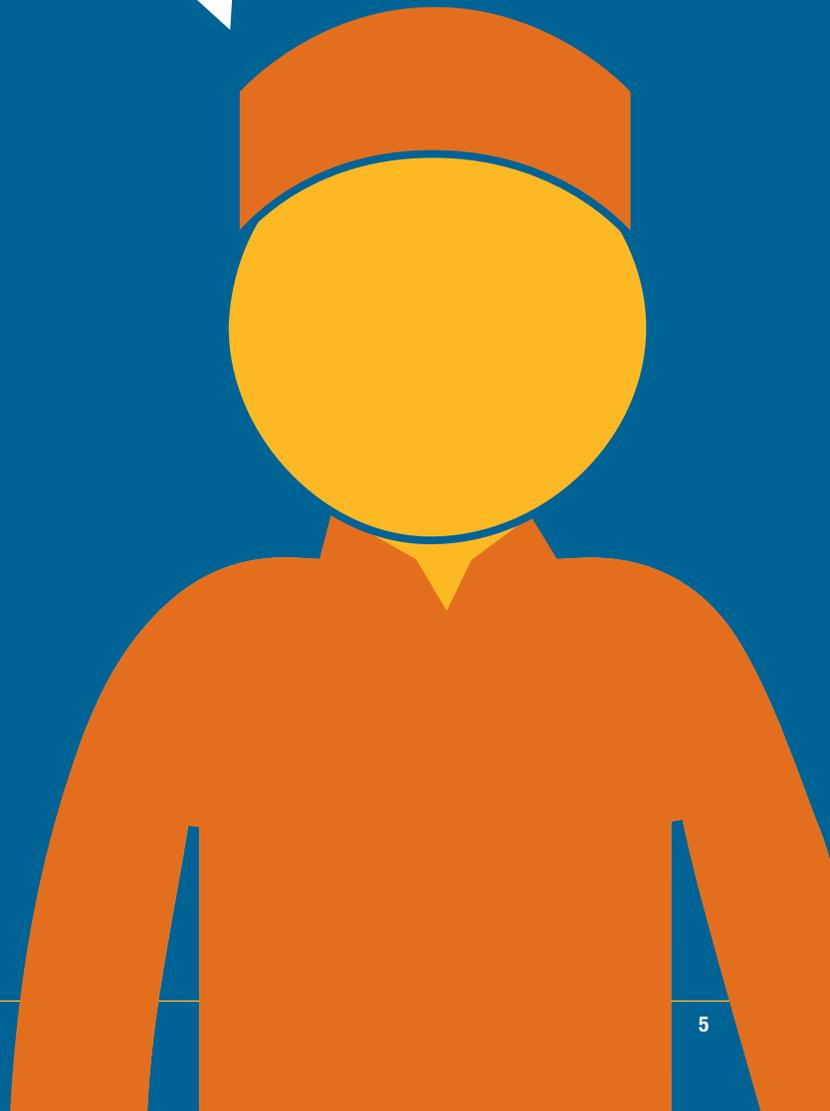
Some commented on the event's potential to influence the value placed on girls in society:

*People will start to value girls, and the community will change the way people think towards girls.*

24-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

We live in a society where the girls are not valued or considered in a good way, not trusted, and not much is expected from them. But these types of events help to see them in a different way and value them... It gives a feeling that girls are also capable enough and should be treated equal to boys.

28-YEAR-OLD MAN



## BUT ARE EXPECTATIONS OF BROTHERS AND SISTERS CHANGING?

Empirical expectations are what we think others in our communities are doing or thinking. In social norms theory, empirical expectations influence our behaviors and are primarily formed by what we see or hear around us. Change becomes possible when we perceive changes in others. The Tipping Point team asked community members how others thought about brother-sister relationships.

Raksha Bandhan as traditionally practiced emphasizes the duty of a brother to protect his sister. When asked about the converse, about sisters protecting their brothers, all those interviewed agreed that sisters can and should protect their brothers.

**Not only the brothers can protect the sisters, but the sisters can also protect their brothers.**

**17-YEAR-OLD GIRL**

Yet they struggled to define what that means for them and how a girl can 'do protection.'

***The girls protect their brother by blessing them to be happy, for their protection and to stay safe.***

**24-YEAR-OLD WOMAN**

***Sisters can do protection when the brothers are sick and they need to go somewhere.***

**33-YEAR-OLD MAN**

Interviews also asked about how brothers and sisters support each other. Most comments reflect a more traditional understanding of a sister's duty to her brother—that of obedience.

***The brothers also wish their sisters to be respectful, ask them [for permission] when they need to go outside, and obey what they say. If the sisters do not conduct themselves like this, the brothers get angry.***

**45-YEAR-OLD WOMAN**

***Sisters support their brothers during their low times. They need to be obedient to what brothers say. They cannot go anywhere without asking their brothers, ask about what kind of clothes to wear, do what makes her brother happy—that is how brothers can maintain their prestige.***

**33-YEAR-OLD MAN**

Similarly, the traditional functional obligations of brothers towards their sisters persist, as in finding a husband and giving material support when needed.

***If sisters are deprived of some wealth or resources, brothers need to support them. After providing education, they have a responsibility to marry their sisters to a good house. Sisters receive cash from their brothers and provide blessings to have good earnings and manage his family well.***

60-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

***The brothers search for a good house and groom for their sister, to get his sister married and give dowry.***

45-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

So, it seems that gender norms about duty and obligations between sisters and brothers remain strong. However, respondents said that expectations of brothers have expanded from what they were previously and now include supporting their sisters' education through at least the primary levels. They also gave examples of when brothers spoke up with parents on behalf of a girl or made personal sacrifices themselves to support their sisters' education.

***I can remember a boy in my neighborhood who encouraged his sister, who had failed her school boards, to continue her education, and talked with his parents about delaying her marriage.***

24-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

***There are a few instances where the parents didn't allow continuing the education of their daughter, but the brother convinced the parents to continue with his sister's education.***

17-YEAR-OLD GIRL



**There are some instances in the community where a brother has dropped his studies and supported his sister's education.**

**MAN, NO AGE GIVEN**

One woman articulated how a brother's support for a girl contributes to her happiness:

***Sisters can speak with their brothers on topics like child marriage. The family values the brother's opinion and considers his voice. Around 10-15% of the boys from the community talk to their sisters about continuing their (sisters') education. It is important for him to fulfill her dreams. It makes the girl happy, ultimately making the family happy where she lives. The brother should also support the decision of her marriage. There are even a few instances where the marriage didn't get conducted or situations when the girl says no to the marriage or doesn't prefer the boy for the marriage.***

**24-YEAR-OLD WOMAN**



## THE IMPERATIVE TO PROTECT GIRLS

Normative expectations are what we think others expect us to do. This is informed by the types of behaviors and individuals we see being *sanctioned positively* (celebrated or rewarded) versus those that are sanctioned negatively (publicly denounced, ostracized, or punished). When asked how the community would react to a brother who supported his sister's aspirations for education and autonomy versus a brother who 'protected' his sister, community members were clear that protecting sisters remains imperative. In this context, sexual and physical violence against women is a real threat. A woman or girl alone in public may be considered a legitimate target for harassment or attack, as if the act of venturing out by herself is an invitation. The presence of a male—even a young boy—guards against such a perception. On another level, the brother acts as a representative of the family in safeguarding perceptions of a girl's purity by ensuring she is not speaking to unrelated boys or men.

***Girls need to be accompanied by someone when they need to go to the village for school. If girls go alone to school, that would not be a problem, but if she is seen with someone (a boy), the community perceives it negatively. Brothers need to call out their sisters in such situations and inform the family about it.***

**60-YEAR-OLD WOMAN**

**Most of the people are focused on the girls' immediate safety. My parents send my younger brother to accompany my sister in case they have to go to a religious function or a wedding.**

**28-YEAR-OLD MAN**



Often girls are blamed for becoming the focus of attention from men and boys outside the home, and parents are more likely to restrict a girl's outings if she is receiving any attention, even unwanted, from unrelated males. 'Eve teasing' (verbal harassment) is considered such a threat to a family's honor that it is often cited as the impetus for scheduling a girl's marriage. Yet there are signs that brothers who have close relationships with their sisters may also act within the family to defend a girl's behavior. Respondents suggested that a boy's advocacy for a girl can help deflect blame away from a girl that is being harassed.

***When a girl is teased, and she shares her problem with her parents, it is easier to convince her parents if her brother or someone witnessed the incident. Only a few girls have a space to speak about their problems with their parents or brothers. The situation is changing but the problem still prevails in our community.***

**17-YEAR-OLD GIRL**

One respondent summarized the community's views this way:

***The community sees the boy [supporting his sister] in a good way. If girls are facing violence, they can speak with their parents and they can advocate for the same... It is also important to protect her and be concerned with her safety. It is important to know where she is, whether she is safe or not, and also support fulfilling her dreams. The family thinks of her safety in the first hand.***

**MAN, NO AGE GIVEN**

Thus, physical (and moral) protection remains more important than supporting a girl's hopes for the future. Still, the 17-year-old girl that was interviewed looks to that future as a time when girls do not have to rely on family for their safety:

**After [girls and women] become self-confident and independent, they can protect themselves. They can go to the police and seek their protection from the concerned authorities.**

**17-YEAR-OLD GIRL**





## Potential of Raksha Bandhan as a Tactic for Social Norms Change

By reshaping a traditional ritual, the Tipping Point team in Nepal garnered public support for growing equality between sisters and brothers. Public discussion after the event drew out ways that brothers are already helping sisters achieve their goals and individual commitments to do more. The activity seems to have been very meaningful for the adolescents that participated, who were enthusiastic about the possibility of being friends with their siblings and sharing their feelings with each other.

Community interviews gave evidence that some boys are strong allies of their sisters and play instrumental roles in securing their rights to education and marital choice. However, 'protecting girls' continues to mean controlling their movements and behaviors. Tipping Point is considering how to build on the Raksha Bandhan initiative to confront norms around female purity, male protectorship, and girls' mobility outside the home.

Build a **campaign around public pledges for boys** to refrain from eve teasing and intervene when a girl is being harassed (**Design Principle 6**).

Deepen the **dialogue between brothers and sisters** about control of girls' mobility and girls' rights to autonomy (**Design Principle 4**).

Facilitate sessions with parent groups to **envision a community in which girls are safe to travel** by themselves, and what would make that possible (**Design Principle 3**).

Find girls and parents (early adopters) willing to **pilot self-defense classes for adolescent girls** to generate greater confidence in their abilities to defend themselves physically (**Design Principle 1**).

Hold open **conversations with parents about their own relationships with siblings** and the benefits of having siblings with whom one can share one's dreams (**Design Principle 5**).

# Implementation Guide: Raksha Bandhan

## NEPAL

The Raksha Bandhan activity built on a traditional Hindu ritual that was familiar to people. Normally, girls tie threads (*rakhis*) around their brothers' wrists, pray for their long lives, and ask them for their protection. Brothers respond by promising to protect their sisters throughout their lives and giving them a small gift. The process of introducing a modified version of the traditional ceremony had three components:

1. Gender analysis and stakeholder consultations
2. Annual events
3. Community reflection

### Gender analysis and stakeholder consultations

As part of Tipping Point's planning processes, the local Nepal team reflected on the various festivals and rituals celebrated in the project areas and considered whether they placed equal value on the girl child. Raksha Bandhan, which literally means 'a bond of protection,' stood out to the team as inequitable in the roles it assigned to boys and girls and also as a ritual that might be reinterpreted to better recognize girls and boys as equals.

Group facilitators began discussions with adolescent and parent groups, asking, what does the festival of Raksha Bandhan convey? What are the messages within it? Does it strengthen the notion of equality, and if so, how? What would happen if boys also tied *rakhis* to their sisters' wrists? Would there be any harm or benefit to doing it that way?

In adolescent groups, boys and girls were quick to see that Raksha Bandhan celebrates unequal gender relations. They welcomed the idea of doing a mass celebration of the festival in public that would give brothers and sisters identical roles in the ritual while still strengthening the

### THE OBJECTIVES OF RAKSHA BANDHAN

1. Address patriarchal social norms of brothers as protectors and sisters as supplicants.
2. Promote skills amongst adolescents to question unequal gender norms and negotiate equality.
3. Facilitate open discussions on celebrating rituals that offer mutual and equal protection, bonding and love.
4. Forge stronger bonds between brothers and sisters.
5. Encourage brothers to be supportive of their sisters and foster two-way communication between them.

bonds between them. Parent groups also supported the idea and worked with the adolescents to consult with religious leaders and gain their blessing to conduct the ritual a bit differently. Although Raksha Bandhan is a Hindu tradition, all were invited. Muslim adolescents and families also participated, and all castes were represented.

### Annual events

**Year 1:** The brothers and sisters came all dressed up and in a festive mood. After discussing the importance of the festival, the brother-sister duos tied *rakhis* on each other's wrists. The girls who had no brothers tied them on their sisters' wrists. Instead of giving gifts, sisters asked their brothers to give up smoking, gambling, drinking,

or other bad habits. The brothers promised to do so with the community watching. Some weeks after the ritual, girls' and boys' groups reflected on the event, reported that boys' behavior had not changed much, and decided that the following year needed to better emphasize the message of equality between boys and girls.

**Year 2:** The second year, the preparatory conversations with project groups focused on how or when, if ever, girls play protective roles for brothers and other sisters, and even for parents. It also questioned why girls need protection. Can they protect themselves? What do they need to protect themselves from: violence, teasing, bullying, molestation, or rape? Can girls build the courage and skills needed to protect themselves?

On the day of the event, people had heard about the previous year's activity and came from all over, including from villages where Tipping Point is not working directly. Brothers and sisters were excited to celebrate their relationships. This time, before the brothers and sisters tied knots of love and friendship, they discussed how they had been supporting each other by sharing, in public, small changes they had made in their lives that demonstrate mutual love and respect. These included helping each other finish the household chores so that both could start school on time. They also shared that communication between brothers and sisters has become stronger, and they are standing up for each other to negotiate with parents and others about matters important to them. Brothers and sisters tied *rakhis*, shared sweets, wished each other the best in life, and took vows to support each other. What was unique about these events was the fact that it created discussion between the brothers and sisters and helped them understand one another. The post-event discussions served to be venues for sisters to express the fact that they wanted to go to school, or of the troubles they had in getting to their schools. This helped brothers see the challenges their sisters were facing and commit to being more supportive of sisters.

In the public dialogue that followed the ceremony, adolescents addressed the following questions:

- How many of you did the Raksha Bandhan exercise in a community event last year? What were your vows to each other? How did you feel about the vows and the exchange this year? Can anyone share their experience?
- What are your vows for this year? Why did you take this vow? How would it help you having a close relationship with your sibling? How would it strengthen the love and respect between brother and sister?
- Do you want to share any of your experiences or feelings related to the festival or your relationship with your brother or sister?

## Community reflection

In the weeks following the public Raksha Bandhan ceremony, adolescent groups, parent groups, and religious leaders reflected on the following questions in facilitated dialogues:

- **Adolescents:** How did you feel during the event? Do you think the event has any effect on the larger community? Did you hear any comments from others? What were the comments and how did you respond to them?
- **Parents:** Do you think there is any difference in the environment at home due to these reflections and events at the community level? How do you feel about it? What support did you offer for your children to participate? How do you think the discourse of equality and respect should be continued?
- **Religious leaders:** Do you see any harm in tweaking the rituals? Do you see any good for the community if they are tweaked this way? What can you do or say to support the change? Do you feel this would strengthen the bond between brothers and sisters or help them negotiate for their rights with each other's support? Why or why not?



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