



# The Situation in Contractual Work at Domestic Sphere: A Study of the Paid Female Domestic Workers of Howrah, West Bengal, India

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## Abstract

*The present study is on the Hindu Bengali speaking women who were mainly from Schedule Caste and Other Backward Class group, work in the informal sector as a domestic worker (maids) locally termed as Thiker (contractual) jhi (lady) / Kajer (worker) masi (aunty) at the urban areas of Howrah district of West Bengal. They perform the household tasks, mainly washing of utensils and clothes, sweeping and cleaning house along with other run errand as well as few outdoor tasks like irregular grocery shopping etc. The research has tried to explore the present situation of the domestic workers from the narratives of the self of the householders and of the domestic workers themselves. Participants were selected by using snowball technique. Total hundred respondents of domestic workers and fifty householders were interviewed. The defense statements of the employers were collected to understand the existing situation. Study explored the violence faced by the domestic worker at their workplace consciously or unconsciously due to the underlined concept of unclean occupation and the exploitations due to their poor economic and educational condition.*

**Keywords:** Domestic worker, domestic work place, violence, exploitation.

## Introduction

The term domestic worker denotes the worker who is directly under the authority of householder; the work is done by following the straight instructions of the employer who shall not originate any economic gain from the activity done by the worker. The workplace is a personal dwelling. Domestic workers are responsible to provide service to the householders on a regular basis and in a continuous manner in return for wage, either in cash and/or in kind<sup>1</sup>. Works include many types like sweeping, house cleaning, clothes and utensil cleaning, sometimes caring child or aged and other run errand etc. In India it is found that among all categories in the informal sector, domestic servants' income is the lowest and the problems are many<sup>2</sup>. Most of them live in slums, lead a monotonous life without any color, struggle every day for their survival and face a numerous problems in their day to day life like long hours of work, insecurity regarding jobs, low status within the house as well as in the outside world<sup>3</sup>. According to 1991 census report at least 270,835 men and 460,279 women identified as servants (census report of Government of India 1991). National Sample Survey (NSS) data revealed male domestic workers' number remain stagnant at 3 lakhs between the year 1983 and 1999 and the numbers of female domestic workers increased from 12 lakhs to 20 lakhs in the same period in India<sup>4</sup>. NDWM 2010 report showed up to 90% of domestic workers are female in India. So the number of female domestic workers are not low in India, rather has risen day after day<sup>5</sup>. Yeoh and Huang 1999 assumed, *in countries where there is a rapid influx of women into the formal economy... paid reproductive labour has been introduced as a means to alleviate (one set of) women's*

*domestic burden [so that they can join the formal work economy], often by transnationalizing it to (im)migrant women (pp 273)<sup>6</sup>. The maid is the market substitute for the working mother, wife and/or daughter<sup>7, 8</sup>. It has also been contended that maids play significant symbolic roles in signaling the class standing of employers<sup>9</sup>. Hiring domestic workers has become a matter of social necessity to construct and maintain the wealth and social position<sup>10, 11</sup>.*

In addition, employers (women in particular) may also be buying modernity via this form of consumption. It follows from the preceding consideration of other factors involved in hiring a maid, conflated into need, that the hiring of Domestic worker is both informed by and reinforces (and in many ways, exacerbates) existing interlocking systems of inequality and practices of commodification of labor and status enhancement<sup>12</sup>. It is a fact that domestic workers who used to hire to do socially invisible work [domestic and care giving] are in a socially and legally marginal position<sup>13</sup>. Their presence is largely absent from state policy in India<sup>14</sup>. As early as 1959, a Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill was moved in the Rajya Sabha as a private member's bill, but it was never enacted. The existing laws of the states in India are not capable to deal with the specific problems of domestic workers, their workplaces, and their relations with environment. The non-recognition of the home as a workplace is identified as a critical factor connected to the invisibility and devaluation of care and unpaid domestic work as well as much of women's work in India<sup>15</sup>. Numerous violence they used to face on a regular courses such as harassment, exploitation, discriminatory attitude, physical aggression such as physical torture (in varying intensity), sexual

abuse and even rape by the employers, mental torture through verbal abuse, humiliation, bullying, blackmail, threats (economic or emotional) etc. There is lack of legal protection systems for domestic workers against this abuse. Even being positioned at the lowest social order of Indian society, female domestic workers are more vulnerable to exploitation for being women and for holding low caste position. They face discrimination on the basis of gender, class as well as caste. These conditions together leads to the widespread violence that encompass the women's lives, characterized by continuing violence both in the community and in the family, and in caste structure and different socio-economic groupings also<sup>16</sup>.

Since 1980's scholars<sup>17-21</sup> have focused light on servants in different regions of the world and have discussed the common problem of invisibility of servants. Verma has focused on the socially significant issues of exploitation and abuse inherent within maid employer relations at Singapore. Though there are several studies on female labours but a little effort has been made on the female domestic maid<sup>22</sup>. In Indian context, Meredith Borthwick in 1984 while studying the changing roles of nineteenth-century Bengali women has included brief accounts of servants, matchmakers, washing women, and midwives in *bhadra* families of colonial Calcutta<sup>23</sup>. Sinha<sup>24</sup>, Sen<sup>25</sup> and Chatterjee<sup>26</sup> have also vested interest in domestic worker. Sinha examined the criminal justice system under colonial laws and provided an account of the nature of employer-domestic relationships in the British households in India. Sen highlighted the condition of women labour in late colonial period. Chatterjee focused light on the importance of slavery in ruling households of eastern India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Later Banerjee has explored many facets of employer-servant relationships through a selective reading of middle-class personal narratives and also documented the history of keeping domestic workers in a middle class family<sup>27</sup>. Bharti and Mahrotra found that the vulnerabilities of domestic workers were located in their lack of negotiating power in all aspects of their work including the wage negotiation process, number of holidays, having a cup of tea and snack, or getting gifts and bonus<sup>28</sup>. Recently Chakravarty and Chakravarty in 2010 showed how a particular labour market (i.e. domestic service), a traditionally domain of men became segregated both by gender and age after the separation of West Bengal (from Bangladesh), mainly in Calcutta<sup>29</sup>. During this year, Qayum and Ray studied women as domestic servant in a different manner. They showed *failure of patriarchy* by the narratives of the woman servant who portrayed their lives as inevitable failure of the patriarchy to perform their socially prescribed familial and social duties<sup>30</sup>.

By this present study an attempt has been made to know about their present social situation and the experiences of violence, emotions, feelings and aspirations of this vulnerable group of the society having negligible safe guards. The defense statements of the employers also enriched the data to understand the existing situation.

## Methodology

This ethnographic research was collected the data of female workers who work at domestic sphere in the local urban areas of Howrah district of West Bengal. They were Hindu Bengali speaking and deed housekeeping in the informal sector as part-time paid domestic worker. Their age group varies from twelve to sixty five years. For a deeper understanding of the contextual phenomena in-depth interview and case study technique were utilized. Other techniques like observation, semi-structured interview, and voice recording were also done for this research. Snowball sampling seems appropriate for reaching the participants. Total hundred and fifty interviewees were getting in contact among them hundred are domestic worker and rest fifty were a householder who were chosen to understand the defense view in this context. Interpretative analysis method was used for analyzing the data.

**Domestic Worker and their Social Position:** The domestic workers covered in this study were slum dwellers. They either have their own houses or live in rented ones. These houses have tile thatched roofs, brick-made walls with electricity connection in most of the cases, except 3 where there is no power supply. They don't have toilet facility inside the homes. They use the common toilet or bathroom situated in the locality and fetch drinking water from public tap. Some of them use Chula for cooking, others use kerosene stove in most of the cases and very few of them use gas oven. They usually walk to their workplaces and go to different houses with no fixed minimum wage (in many cases they receive very low pay), and have no job security. Most of them have a history of migration in the past generation. It is not so easy to become a professional domestic worker, which needs speed with efficiency. One has to work in at least three households within two to three hours to earn a decent living (though the wage is not so balanced compared to other labour jobs). Fresher are not warmly welcomed in those households where both the husband and the wife work in an office or if they have to leave for workplace very early. A fresher sometimes learns domestic work by accompanying and assisting her mother at childhood, else get training from the employer according to the needs. Fifty-two years old Sandhya said,-

*When I started my journey as a domestic worker, I was totally inexperienced. I was totally unaware about the fact. I used to take too much time to finish my work. My first employer was kind enough, she guided me a lot. She used to tell me what to do and what not, how to clean and what she needed. For example, I used to clean the clothes only by twisting, rolling and squeezing it within liquid detergent. One day she advised me to use the brush to clean the dirt of a T-shirt collar. This way I became trained as a professional. Frankly speaking my experience also makes me a shirker. Now, whenever I get a chance to shirking I take it.*

It is found that the majority of the domestic workers are from lower caste group in the caste hierarchy. Traditionally their ancestors' are carpenter, barber, washer man, weaver, or cobbler. Several have reported that they belong to either Schedule Caste group (49%) or Other Backward Class (19%) group. But maximum doesn't want to disclose their identity as SC or OBC. They have an idea that SC and OBC are the lowest in caste hierarchy and the neighbors would avoid them after knowing the truth.

**Table-1**  
**Distribution of Marital status**

Marital status	Number of Workers
Married	67
Unmarried	9
Widow	13
Separated	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

The majority of the respondents i.e. 67 are married. Several have admitted that after marriage they were compelled to join in this profession to run their household smoothly. They even reported that after the birth of babies their husbands couldn't afford enough money to raise the children and their in-laws advised them to earn money parallel to that of husbands. The majority of the domestic workers surveyed in the study have their mothers or any other member of the family in this profession. Some have reported that due to the poor economic condition at father's place they had started work in the domestic sphere and they are continuing even after marriage. In 11 cases the interviewees informed that they chose this profession as their husbands had left them and 2 of them said that their husbands were absconding and in either case after facing an enormous struggle, they had no option but to join domestic work for earning bread.

**Table-2**  
**Distribution based on age-groups and levels of formal education of Workers**

Age groups	Non-literate	Primary	Middle Standard	Secondary	Higher secondary
14-21	1	4	7	0	0
22-29	2	3	14	0	0
30-37	1	9	10	1	0
38-45	2	15	4	1	0
46-53	7	5	3	0	0
54-61	5	4	0	0	0
62+	2	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>

Among the 100 interviewees, maximum left their study at the primary level or middle standard. Only two of them qualified Madhyamik exam. Twenty respondents are found to be non-literate and they are mainly between the age group of 45 to 62 and above. No-one has reached higher secondary levels. The

reasons behind the drop out as they reported are: i. poor economic condition in the family, ii. the need to look after younger brother or sister as both the parents are working, iii. unwillingness to go to school, iv. first generation learners, v. cannot compete with the other mainstream students in class and vi. isolation at school due to the unskilled profession of the parents. Ruma a forty years old domestic worker shared-

*My mother was a domestic worker and she worked to run her family as my father was an alcoholic man and couldn't contribute anything. One of my neighbor who was in my class had spread that my mother is a maid servant. All class mates had started to avoid me and they hardly talk with me. Even one day a friend asked me is your mother goes for other places to clean utensils? I felt so disgust. I had started to seat in the last bench to stay away from them. I did not felt interest in school or study. Finally I quitted the school.*

**Table-3**  
**Distribution of self Income**

Range of Rupees/month	Number of Workers
1000- 2000	52
2001- 3000	35
3001- 4000	10
4001+	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Their self-income ranges from rupees 1,000 to 4,500 per month and the majority of them are under the income group of rupees 1,000 to 2,000 per month. Their total family income ranges from rupees 2,000 to 8,000 per month. In every case, the numbers of members in each family do not exceed 5 individuals. The second earner of the family is either engaged in unskilled jobs (like driving car/auto riksaw, pooling paddle riksaw, shop employee, mechanic, factory machine runner, labour etc) or found as unemployed. The domestic maids spent 5 to 7 hours daily in 3 to 7 employers' household but earn pitiable. They receive increments only after working in the same household for 2 to 3 years, which varies from rupees 30 to 100 in a year. The increment is granted only when demanded. Sometimes they use the high price of goods and their difficulties to run their family as a plea to ask for increment, otherwise they threaten to quit the job if the increment is not granted. Malati, a forty-eight years old domestic worker narrated,-

*The masters never increase the amount until I insist. I always have to place the demand for increment before them. There are some masters who only understand the language of threat. If I appeal to increase my salary, they will never pay attention to my words, but if I become rude and threaten them that I will quit the job if the salary is not raised, then they will consider the matter.*

Until a new entrant is trained in her schedule work she usually works with low wage than the running rates. The wages are not decided by following any rules, rather used to decide by the

domestic workers. Their demand value become fix if they could able to influence the employer by their capabilities of settlement. The wages also differ locality wise (remuneration is higher in upper middle class, middle class households and in the new high-rise apartments while it seems low in lower middle class households) and sometimes person to person. Even in some cases, workers demand higher remuneration when they feel that they are indispensable to the households. Most of the workers said that they used to avoid working in those households where members are many, only they come in settlement if they were offered more money. Sometimes they compel to work in large families when they do not find other jobs or when the size of the family increases during the course of their service time (for instance, with the marriage of young men in the family), but in these cases they demand increments. The initial negotiation of the work and wage depends on the negotiating person who mediates between the worker and the employer. This negotiator most of the time is also a domestic worker. In maximum cases, it could be a relative or friend or neighbor of the worker who is familiar with the employer. The study revealed that most domestic workers find work through other domestic workers. A fresher could join a larger network over a period of time.

**Perception of Domestic Worker's:** *Pets have their respect but we don't have, we are servants, perform unclean jobs. We clean dirt, so we are dirty, low caste people you know!-*

This was the narrative of Promila, a fifty-two years old woman. She used to feel sad and suffer from poor self esteem due to her job. This is a very common feeling of a female domestic worker. Employers always classify domestic work or workers as a menial job or menial workers. The concept of clean and unclean was broken up earth according to the occupational categories from the historic time. It was taken for granted that who serves is a servant (maid) means the *Shudra* or lower caste group. Employers' attitudes towards their maids create the feeling of inferiority among the domestic workers. Because underlined mind set is a mental process through which one can form a judgment and draw conclusion about it. The employers make this kind of judgments every day with them. As a result the maids develop feelings that their jobs are worse, unskilled, and they are in a non-prestigious occupation.

The behaviors they receive from the employers force them to think they are low. Twenty-six years old Jaya narrated,-

*We are discarded fellow; society perceives us very low in the social strata. We are unwanted in the list of invitations while the others are welcomed at the relatives' place. We can't admit our children in non-government school as we are poor and work as a servant. The friends of my son used to avoid him for her mother's profession. They avoid my son at the time of playing games. He used to cry in front of me. Do you think we don't feel this? Don't we cry?*

Having this sentiment, the majority admitted that they don't want to bring their daughters in this profession. Mita is thirty nine years old domestic worker admitted-

*I don't want to bring my daughter in this profession. People hate us, look down upon us. Even she (daughter) makes herself aloof at school as she has a bad experience due to her mother's profession. She has very few friends. I feel so bad for my child. I don't want she would feel sorrow for her daughter in future.*

**Violence They Faced at Domestic Work Place:** Violence is overstuffed in our society. It is present almost everywhere, crossing all social classes, genders, religions, races, age groups even caste groups. People are being tortured, beaten up and killed. Violence within our homes is domestic violence and when it is towards the worker who serves in a domestic sphere called violence at domestic workplace. Violence at domestic workplace is becoming an inherent phenomenon being passed on from one generation to another. It has many forms - verbal, emotional, physical and sexual. Social influence and psychological situations fuel the violence. One of the reasons of violence against domestic workers is the orthodoxy of the people who appoint them and perceive them as unclean and low in social strata for their unskilled nature of the profession. The accounts of the domestic workers' have clearly supported the statement. For instance,

*I am being provided a separate plate and cup for taking food and drinks. This is not a case of a single house. I have no right to drink water in the same glass which my masters take. Said Shephali (42yrs) a domestic worker.*

*Madam used to identify us from the scavenger group as we clean dirt, once she told me don't seat on the sofa where your masters seat. I have to seat on the floor always; no matter it is summer or winter. Manty (39yrs) a domestic worker also reported.*

The counter views also indicate that there is an unhealthy mindset that influences the relationship between householders and the domestic workers. This attitude makes the domestic workers more vulnerable. Rajarshree (36 yrs) a Graduate employer narrated,

*Of course not! I will never offer her drinks in the same glass or cup that we use. God knows what type of disease she is carrying! These types of people are not so clean you know! They are so unhygienic.*

*I know I'm doing is wrong. They are human beings after all. But I'm doing what I have observed from my mother and mother-in-law. From past they have been provided separate drinking glasses. So I'm following the same. And it is a fact I'll dislike if she takes a sip at the glass that we use. -Said Soma (45 yrs) a Graduate, employer.*

*No I don't allow her to seat in my bed. She is so dirty you know! She does cleaning at others' places, even I will not tolerate her inside my kitchen. - Shared Ujjoyini (60 yrs) a Higher Secondary Exam passed employer.*

Domestic workers are sometimes provided food or tea by their employers. Not all but a number of employers provide tiffins to their workers. Very few reported that they never had taken food from any employer at their life time. Several workers have narrated that they have been offered leftover foods by their employers. The study reveals that the workers don't recognize this type of incident as offensive. They require an on-time meal that is fulfilling. No matter the food is fresh or leftover. This saggy outlook immates form their poor educational background and, of course, poor economic condition. Sokhi, forty-eight years old worker narrated,

*She (employer) is very kind, always provides me the tiffin. If she has leftover chapattis and vegetables, she dishes up me. If not, then she provides me puffed rice with either leftover vegetables or vujia and tea. This way I cut off the expenses of my breakfast and save money.*

**Table-4**  
**Types of incident faced by workers**

Ever Experienced/ Experiencing	Frequency
Separate utensils maintained for the worker	96
Leftovers given to workers	55
Never provided any food from any house	29
Same food shared daily as consumed by the owner	18
Harassment by employer	42
Wage deduction in case of damage	18
Wage deduction if owner not in town	15
Wages deducted in case of absence	36
Not permit using a toilet at work place	62
Beating of the worker at work place	4

Domestic workers are referred to as maids or servants not as worker by the householders. Thereby, they are not giving them the status as employees. There are several cases where the workers are treated very well but the reverse also exists. Rekha, a domestic worker of about thirty-eight years narrated,

*She shouted at me because I have switched on the fan in hot summer days while cleaning the room. She questioned would your father pays the bill? Also said that never do this again. She switched off the fan then and there.*

Caste-base violence is also very common among them. This type of violence is mainly inflicted by the aged of the households. Ranu thirty-four years admitted,

*Grandma yelled throw out this lower caste woman. She has touched things here and there. God will never forgive us. It is so heartbreaking you know!*

Papri twenty-seven years old narrated,

*On the first day at Mr. Mukherjee's place, his mother asked me, what is your name? I said Papri. She asked Papri what? What is your surname? I said Das. Then she asked which caste you belong to? It was so shocking! I went there as a domestic worker, not to marry her son. Then why this type of question would arise? I felt so insulted on her reaction when she got conscious that I'm from a lower caste.*

Domestic workers reported that they are compelled to do additional work with no supplementary reimbursement. Sometimes the extra work seems arduous to them. It is something that they do not want to do but are compelled against their will. Mamata (40 yrs) a domestic worker reported,

*She asked me to do cleaning in the bathroom including commode. I don't like this kind of job. Even these works were not included in the contract. After joining her job she used to poke me to do this. She never provided any extra money for these extra works. While I refuse to do this, she threatened me to sack.*

In this context, defense admitted,

*How dare she? A beggar class fellow! How dare she refuse to obey my order? I'm paying her per month; she has to clean my bathroom at least once in a week. This is her duty. I'll sack this idiot if she deny further. - Said Paromita (37 yrs) Graduate employer.*

During the festivals or when the households have guests the workers are expected to do extra work. If the workers ask for additional reimbursement, they are asked to leave the job or sometimes they used to face harassment. Employers used to say that the gift or new saree which they get as gifts, are compensated for their work during the festivals. On the other hand some workers narrated the cases of kindness of their employers. A number of employers provide medicines or offer rupees for health check up at the time of their illness, or grant their leave to take rest for a while. Conversely, some employers anticipated work from the paid workers in spite of their ill health. They do not approve long leave even for wedding ceremony at worker's place. Wages are deducted in lieu of the absence for their illness. Sumitra a fifty eight years old worker shared,

*I was suffering from fever. I was not present at my work places for ten days. While I was joined back to the work, one of the householder gave me only rupees 333 instead of rupees 500. I asked what this is. She replied as you absent for 10 days I have deducted rupees 167 for this month. I said you know I was ill.*

*She said that she was hired a labour for 10 days for my absence. So I have to pay her. I was getting angry and said you can't do this. Then and there she said that if you are unsatisfied then get lost. She is ready to continue in your place. I have nothing to do against this wrongdoing and kept silence.*

One of the main difficulties faced by the domestic workers is provision of holidays or leave. There are some employers who do not subtract payment even if the worker takes more leave than the approved abscond but they jot down the pending works for their workers.

Physical torture is also a burning problem in the informal jobs. Our society places domestic workers at very low position in the social class construction and this is because of the undervaluation of domestic work as an unclean job. This concept also put their occupation at the lower strata even in the informal sector and makes them powerless and defenseless. All these contribute to make them vulnerable in case of torture. If anything goes missing in a home, they are the first to be blamed of stealing, even without a second thought. Doly about twenty-six, a domestic worker shared,

*Two years back I was suspected as a thief. Without any proof, madam asked me to return her golden ring. I was so shocked, I said, really I don't know, maybe I'm poor but not a thief at all. After a long squabble, suddenly she clutched my hair and pulled me towards the gate. I felt so helpless. Her husband threatened me that he will appoint goons to hit my husband and will call the police to arrest me. Even said you can't do anything, influential political leaders are in my pocket... I'll teach you a lesson. I became so upset and left that job without taking that month's salary. From that case an unknown fear always works in my mind whenever I work in employers' places.*

This type of incidence leaves an impression on mind, which is not good for one's mental health. If one is tortured mentally day after day for a long time that hampers the well-being of the person seriously.

Sexual violence is also a very common incidence for the domestic workers. It is found that many have experienced this kind of incident in their lifetime for one time or more, but very few opened up their mouth due to the stigma attached to it. The friend of the victim has reported the incident in some cases; otherwise the victim's self narrated the story. Parul a twenty-six years old victim admitted,

*It was a Sunday evening; Boudi (Mistress of the employer's house) was not at home. When I have finished my work, Dada (Employer) had called me. I said what? He gave me 50 rupees and suddenly touched me physically. I shouted what are you doing? Leave me, I will complain to your wife. He smiled and said who will believe your words? If you need to save your job, you should take this money and keep silent.*

Further Laxmi about thirty-three narrated,

*That time I was only 15 years old. When I was sweeping the floor, suddenly Dada (employer's son) grabbed me from the back and started squeezing my boobs. I felt so shy and could not protest; even I couldn't talk about this embarrassing matter to my parents. This incident happened so many times. I felt so anxious when this was happened to me. I used to stand over there like a fool, like an object. One day he tried to have sex with me forcefully. I left the job finally but couldn't share anything to anybody out of fear.*

## Conclusion

After the discussion of the narratives of domestic workers and their employers, it can be concluded that domestic work is undervalued. They are not recognized as workers as their effort does not take place in a factory or an administrative center or organization, but inside a home. Their performance does not justify to labour market values. The home is not acceptable as a formal workplace, even more as the domestic workers work in several residences, it is difficult to claim any rights or privileges as formal workers. Moreover, occupational health and safety for domestic workers will be difficult to achieve. This is a section which is completely ignored by the legislative framework also.

Awareness is important for them to organize and empower themselves to fight against their exploitation. They are unaware of their rights and dignity, which is very essential for their healthy survival. Proper education could help them realize their situation. They have to unite to raise their voices in front of the public as well as Government. There are very few organizations in India that raise the voice in support of domestic workers, these are : i. All India Domestic Workers Union (Their lobbies go for minimum wages, payment of wages, weekly rest and annual leave periods, as well the establishment of a servant registry), ii. Delhi Domestic Workers Union (Their demand is to accept Domestic Work as *Work* and Domestic Worker as *Workers* and lend it the dignity and reorganization of labor. And iii. The National Consultation on Domestic workers organized by NCW (National Commission of Women). These types of Organizations are very urgent in this present situation. Rally, public meeting, advertisement etc. have also needed to draw attention of the Government to take necessary steps to protect them from any form of violence.

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