Empowerment of Women Farmers in Northern Benin: Multidimensional Analysis based on the WEAI index

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Abstract

Despite their essential role in family farms, women farmers in Benin face limitations in access to resources and decision-making power due to social norms and structural inequalities. This research, conducted in agroecological zones 2 and 3, aims to understand how women access resources, participate in production decisions, and control agricultural income using a mixed approach and drawing on the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI). The results reveal gender disparities, but also local dynamics that are conducive to innovation. This research makes recommendations to strengthen women's empowerment and influence agricultural policies.

Key words: Empowerment, family farming, WEAI, rural development, Benin

Autonomisation des femmes agricoles dans le nord du Benin : Analyse multidimensionnelle basée sur l'indice WEAI

Résumé

En dépit de leur rôle essentiel dans les exploitations familiales, les femmes agricoles au Bénin font face à des limitations d'accès aux ressources et de pouvoir décisionnel, dues à des normes sociales et des inégalités structurelles. Cette recherche, menée dans les zones agroécologiques 2 et 3, vise à comprendre comment les femmes accèdent aux ressources, participent aux décisions de production et contrôlent les revenus agricoles en utilisant une approche mixte et en s'appuyant sur l'*Indice d'Autonomisation des Femmes dans l'Agriculture (WEAI)*. Les résultats révèlent des disparités de genre, mais aussi des dynamiques locales porteuses d'innovation. Cette recherche formule des recommandations pour renforcer l'autonomisation féminine et influencer les politiques agricoles.

Mots-clés : Autonomisation, agriculture familiale, WEAI, développement rural, Bénin

Introduction

Agriculture is a pillar of rural development in sub-Saharan Africa, contributing between 30 and 50% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and providing livelihoods for 70% of the population. Family farming, long marginalized, is now gaining institutional and political recognition in West Africa, the legitimacy is acquired by farmers' organizations in decision-making bodies (M. Mees et al., 2019a) . Although small in size, these small farms play a major role in global food security. They are no longer solely subsistence farms, but embody productive agriculture (M. Mees et al., 2019b).

Faced with the growing complexity of the social world, sociology is broadening its fields of analysis to include social transformations, particularly through the study of rural families, giving rise to rural sociology (A. A. Abdelmalek, 2000). The exploration of farming families, their actors, and gender relations paves the way for a conceptualization of "female power."

Agricultural production systems rely on synergy between men, young people, and women, with the latter increasingly recognized for their essential role in the agricultural economy. Responsibilities within family farms are highly codified according to culture, but women take on an intense workload, both in the fields, where they sow, weed, and harvest, and in the household, where they provide food and care for children. Their sphere of action is concentrated around two areas: the home and the field (A. Barthez, 1984; A. Rieu, 2004; R. Pourtier, 2015; J. Francoeur, 2022).

Agricultural production systems mobilize men, young people, and women in a synergy of coherent actions. Women, long marginalized, are seeing their role increasingly recognized in the agricultural economy. Tasks within family farms are divided according to cultural norms, but women bear a heavy workload, between agricultural activities (sowing, weeding, harvesting) and domestic responsibilities (food, children). Their sphere of activity is structured around two poles: the home and the field.

Developments in family farms reveal the central role of women, whose involvement varies according to the availability and quality of male labor (Y. Droz et al., 2014). They adjust their commitment according to the needs of the farm, while ensuring a complex articulation between the domestic and agricultural spheres. This intertwining generates a significant physical and mental workload that is often overlooked. Women farmers must manage standardized and non-standardized tasks, while mobilizing cognitive strategies to

optimize household and farm resources. This work, although crucial, remains largely invisible, as does their decision-making power (G. Filippi & C. Nicourt, 1987).

As family farming becomes more productive and valued, it is essential to examine the women dynamics of empowerment who have long remained on the margins of decision-making bodies. This reflection, born out of the undervaluation of women's work, is based on the premise that women engaged in farming have limited access to productive resources, thus hindering their empowerment.

This analysis offers a reflection based on three dimensions: production, resources, and income, which are considered essential links in the empowerment of women farmers. Although research in Benin addresses the role of women in family farms, few studies explore these three areas together to identify their causalities. This gap warrants research based on the multidimensional approach of the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) to understand how women access resources, participate in production decisions, and control agricultural income**.**

1. Methodology

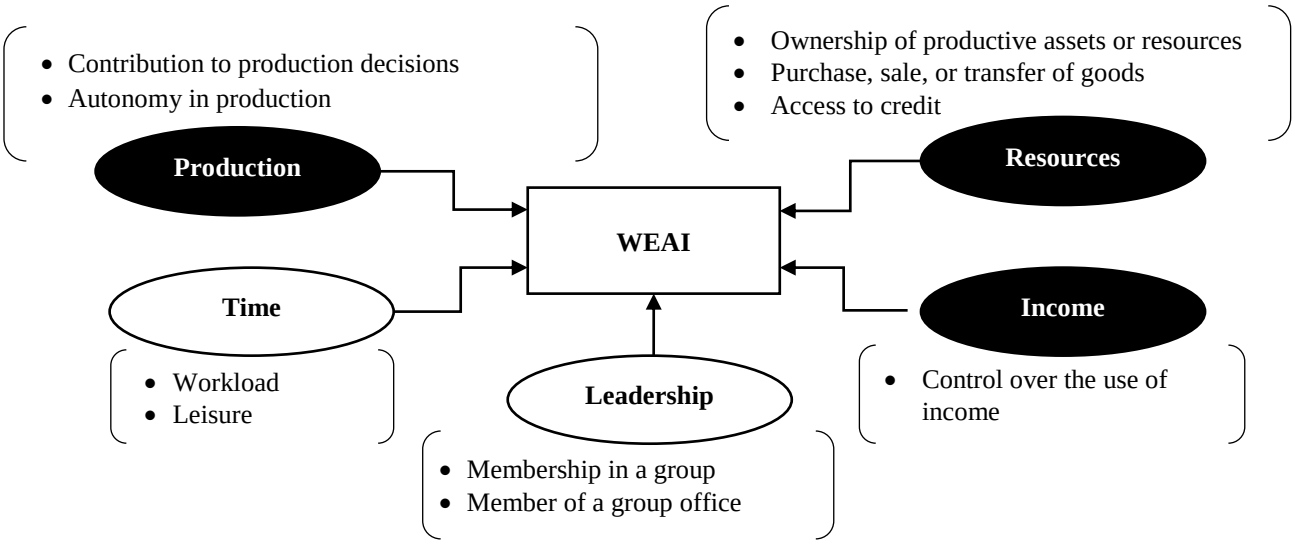
This research adopts a descriptive-analytical methodological approach based on a critical review of the literature and empirical data from agroecological zones (AEZs) 2 and 3 in northern Benin, compiled from a sample of 370 family farms, composed of men and women, obtained using the Cochran formula (1977). The AEZs were chosen for the importance strategic in Beninese agriculture, as their location in Benin means that they represent the two zones that account for most of the crops grown in Benin.

In-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions provided primary data on the realities of agricultural actors and women, particularly regarding production, resources, and income. These areas are part of the Women Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) approach proposed by IFPRI, which we used in this study. The approach generally proposes five areas that are perfectly correlated to analyze the empowerment of women in agriculture.

This study attempts to articulate the areas of production, resources, and income as a productive resource management chain to be considered as a lever for women's empowerment. Resource management becomes a key concept in empowerment by using three of the five domains proposed by the WEAI. The conceptualization of the "resource chain" involves positioning "resources" at the center as a domain that influences production and income. By assessing the contributions of agricultural actors, especially women, to the

production chain, asset management, and control over the use of income, the WEAI approach proves relevant not only in conceptualizing women's empowerment but also in identifying concrete levers for action to enhance the value of women's agricultural work.

Figure1 : Presentation of the WEAI domains



Source: Obossou Hypolite EZIN, 2024

2. Results

The areas of production, resources, and income are presented in this section as links in a chain that we call the "resource chain." This conceptualization of resource management draws its essence from the semantic attribute of the concept of "resource," which N. Nestmann (1996: 362) defines in the social sciences as anything that is valued and/or experienced as useful by a single person in each situation. The assessment of resources according to their usefulness rightly positions production inputs (including decision-making capacities), tangible and intangible assets (productive resources), and income from agricultural production (control over the use of income) as links in a chain that serves as a lever for achieving the objectives of enhancing the value of agricultural work.

The work in this section reveals gender-specific positions in the areas of production, resources, and income in order to assess the empowerment of women farmers in Zone 2 and 3 in Benin.

2.1.Production space and women's empowerment on farms in northern Benin

Family farms in north part of Benin are based on food crops, cash crops, livestock, fishing, fish farming, and non-agricultural economic activities. The results show that these various activities are almost all carried out by agricultural actors, except for fishing and fish farming (2.7%), which are rarely practiced in agroecological zones 2 and 3 of Benin.

Agricultural activities in production areas are carried out according to the season and the farming practices of the production zones.

Women's involvement in agricultural activities depends on the nature of these activities. In general, women contribute to more than 34% of all decisions related to agricultural activities, at least 20% of most decisions, 12% of some decisions, 15% of very few decisions, 8% of respondents make no decisions, and 1% of respondents have no decision-making role.

This overall trend in women's share of power in terms of their degree of participation in decision-making concerning crops illustrates the presence of these women in spaces where they contribute to production decisions. Similarly, there are almost no women who are completely excluded from this space of production decision-making.

The overall rate of women participating in all decisions suggests that some women are involved in discussions on family farms. However, the social organization of work in these agricultural spaces defines a gendered division of women's work and limits their areas of involvement. This leads to forms of deprivation for women in decision-making spaces. As one notable figure in the research area states: "...women are by our side, but they know what they have to do. There are things that are solely the prerogative of men, since it is the man who is the head of the family." I. A., village elder, N'Dali, 2023.

A direct effect of this form of exclusion of women from decision-making spaces is the limitation of their socio-economic empowerment. Beyond the knowledge reserved for women, especially in the stages of processing agricultural products, it is important to consider their involvement in decision-making on the one hand and their autonomy in agricultural activities on the other. If women's ability to process produce and direct the use of production residues is proven, it could be more beneficial for the farming household when women work with men to define the most appropriate farming practices according to market needs.

In most localities, farming practices, even ancestral ones, follow a certain order and balance. However, women's contributions do not hinder or challenge these farming practices, but rather provide better guidance on practices according to needs, such as the choice of crop rotation. One woman attempts to explain her experience and the need to be involved in crop selection, stating:

> ...we women are always at the market and often know what the community needs. For example, we know that when corn is available, peanuts are also available. Whatever the form, these two products go very well together. If I can find both products in my husband's field at the end of the harvest, I can also earn money to better maintain my home...(Ms. Y. S., trader, Nikki, 2024).

The involvement of women in production decision-making processes can drive the sustainable economic empowerment of women in agriculture.

Furthermore, the indicators "contribution to production decisions" and "autonomy in production" are insufficient to better assess women's ability to participate in decisions related to agricultural production activities. These indicators do not take into account the family, social, or cultural constraints associated with women's participation in production decisions, which are considered to be areas strictly reserved for men to exercise their leadership within the family. Notwithstanding informal discussions between spouses away from the public eye, the ability to take the initiative in planning agricultural activities is attributed to men in the cultural space of ZAE 2 and 3. Furthermore, in the communities targeted by this research, women have less access to information sessions and less of techniques and technologies for improving production. These sessions, often offered by decentralized state structures and a few non-governmental organizations, are mainly aimed at men and male heads of households. Even when a woman is the head of the household, she prefers to be replaced by her son or another man from her community. Women are more visible and are brought together for other types of activities related to the processing of agricultural products and product marketing strategies.

2.2.The productive resources of African women farmers facing the sociocultural challenges of property ownership in agricultural areas in northern Benin

Ownership of property or productive resources on family farms in Africa and Benin has long been a major issue affecting the empowerment of women in agriculture. Thus, women's need for productive resources, particularly access to land and other productive resources, regardless of the means of access to those resources, is a determining factor in the empowerment of women farmers in West Africa.

Productive resources are assessed at three levels in this study. The first level addresses issues of ownership of productive assets or resources. The second level addresses issues of purchase, sale, or transfer of assets. The last level presents modes of access to agricultural credit.

Ownership of assets or resources is based on a set of production factors such as agricultural land, livestock (large and small), poultry, fish farming or fishing equipment, agricultural equipment (motorized and non-motorized), non-agricultural equipment, movable and immovable property, and means of transport.

Analysis of the data shows that more than 95% of households have at least one member who owns agricultural land, with men, who are mostly heads of households, being the largest landowners (99.2%). The amount of land that a person can own varies between 0.25 and 69 hectares. Despite these production areas, women generally do not own agricultural land. This trend of land ownership by men is rooted in social role-playing and the intertwining of social networks marked by cultural and religious norms.

As for small and large livestock, 80% of households own some, but the heads of households are not always the owners. This livestock often belongs to other members of the household, such as the wife, children, or another family member living in the household. The size of the herd ranges from 1 to 375 head. In fact, women are involved in the management of property and certain productive resources as guarantors of proper monitoring and management. Women are not always direct owners, but they possess endogenous knowledge for managing livestock. For livestock that require special monitoring and produce usable materials such as milk, women work with livestock products and derive legitimacy from their management. This structural trend in communities, especially those with strong livestock farming practices, reinforces women's social attributes in livestock management and strengthens the factors that empower them. Women thus find a prominent place in the management of assets or productive resources, even if the question of ownership remains.

The low level of mechanization in agricultural production in Benin reflects the low use of agricultural equipment, whether motorized or not. Motorized equipment is used very little (10%) compared to non-motorized agricultural equipment (79.3%). As for ownership, family structures are such that agricultural equipment is never perceived as the property of an individual but rather that of the group, family, or community. Its purchase or forms of procurement are not the initiative of one person but of the entire group of people who are members of the household. This impersonal and non-appropriative nature of the equipment, whether motorized or not, is intended to promote collective ownership. Movable and immovable property and other types of production factors are present in more than 80% of households and do not always belong solely to the head of the household but also to other members of the household.

In general, ownership of property or productive resources is largely reserved for male heads of households (at least 40%), followed by women (around 30%) and other household members (30%).

Depending on the distribution of ownership of productive resources, the purchase, sale, donation, and even pledging or leasing of production factors depends on the owner.

Otherwise, women on farms are as free as men to dispose of their property as they wish. However, there is a strong relationship between the mode of acquisition of the property and the types of uses.

One producer explains that:

> ... as you mention women, if a woman obtains agricultural land through the restitution of her late husband's property, she does not have the right to sell it. This land must be used for the children of the deceased. If this woman no longer wishes to use the land, one of her late husband's brothers may become the new owner following a decision by the family council. " B. A., farm manager, Alibori, 2024.

Thus, women do not always have the right to make decisions about the factors of production at their disposal, especially when one of the factors is a provision or a bequest. Conversely, all members of the household, including women (30% on average for all types of assets combined), contribute to the decision-making process relating to the purchase of a factor of production (agricultural land, livestock, agricultural or non-agricultural equipment, etc.).

As women very rarely own productive assets or resources, including land, they face a lack of control and limited access to resources, which undermines their empowerment.

Agricultural credit is an important resource for agricultural producers, especially for women, who often have the fewest resources to leverage in order to obtain money and invest it in agricultural activities. In agroecological zones 2 and 3 of Benin, the structures available to support agricultural producers are NGOs, village savings and credit associations (AVEC), microfinance institutions (IMF), and banks. In addition to these institutions, friends, relatives, and certain merchants are potential providers of agricultural credit. The data reveal that men have greater access to NGOs (98%) and mutual savings and credit groups (97.6%), while women benefit more from AVECs (97.4%), MFIs (96.8%), and banks (93.7%). In search of other types of financial resources, the data show that, depending on the social capital of each household member, including the head of the family, agricultural producers may turn to friends or relatives to take out loans, such as agricultural loans.

In agroecological zones 2 and 3 of Benin, more than 90% of producers avoid agricultural loans, which negatively affects their yields. This reluctance is linked to climatic hazards (rainfall scarcity, soil depletion) and restrictive agricultural policies that limit market opportunities and impose unfavorable sales conditions. These factors reduce profits, making it difficult to repay loans. As a result, access to agricultural financing remains limited, exacerbating inequalities, particularly for women in the management of productive resources.

When an agricultural loan is taken out, the decision is mostly made by the man or head of the household (more than 80% of cases), who also determines how it is used. The highest amount borrowed is two million CFA francs, but more than half of producers consider this amount insufficient. The main barriers to higher demand include lack of collateral, fear of losing it, high interest rates, ancillary costs, and low repayment capacity. In addition, the limits imposed by credit institutions do not meet the real needs of producers.

This situation of women's legitimacy in accessing land and other productive resources presents profound gender inequalities in the management and use of these resources.

2.3.Women's income and control over its use in agroecological zones 2 and 3 in Benin

Income and control over its use in agricultural areas are marked by male influence in a context characterized by a male-dominated social and legal organization. The results reveal that more than 32% of women participate in all decisions concerning the use of income generated by crops, more than 20% participate in most decisions, and only 1% do not participate in decision-making concerning the use of income from crops.

In fact, the management of income from agricultural production is organized to be managed by both men and women according to family structures and socio-cultural management practices specific to the environment. Women who own agricultural production or are heads of households are fully involved in controlling agricultural income. Women who are not heads of households, but rather wives, very rarely participate in income management.

Family structures recognize women's role in a tiny fraction of income: that allocated to household care. It appears that in recognition of women's role in caring for the household in patriarchal systems such as those in agro-ecological zones 2 and 3, women receive a minimum amount of resources to provide food and related care for their children. A local organization leader states: "In this locality, women cannot say anything in front of men. If it is a matter of money, it is first and foremost the man's business, and he is the head of the family. He disposes of the income as he sees fit." Mr. D. M., Local leader, Nikki

Beyond the standard limits of women's involvement in income control, there is a fringe group of women farmers who are developing control systems with the support of their husbands. These systems are based on decentralized financial services that serve as savings accounts. The women interviewed during this research mainly use AVECs and traditional savings systems such as the Caisse Locale de Crédit Agricole Mutuel (CLCAM). This strategy, developed by farming households at the end of the agricultural season or production cycle, enables households to secure resources for future needs and facilitates also the granting

of agricultural loans. One woman describes her involvement in resource control: “As we need loans every agricultural year and try to seek for credit from microfinance institutions, my husband often entrusts me with his agricultural income, which we save and use later as a financial basis to obtain new agricultural loans after a while." Mrs. S. O., soybean processor, Nikki.

The ability of women farmers to control income depends on power relations within the household, which are influenced by their economic autonomy. Those who engage in income-generating activities, such as processing or trading, are more likely to be involved in financial management, even without directly contributing to production. With their own resources, they influence power dynamics, not by breaking social norms, but by establishing a managerial balance that repositions them in the decision-making space.

3. Discussion

This research analyzes the influence of agricultural practices on women's empowerment. It then identifies the limitations on women's access to productive resources. Finally, the analysis explores the mechanisms of income management and its use by women farmers.

Family farms in northern Benin rely on a variety of agricultural activities, with little fishing or fish farming in certain areas. Women participate in agricultural decisions to varying degrees, but their involvement remains limited by social norms and gendered division of labor. Despite their essential role in processing and marketing products, their limited access to decision-making spaces and training hinders their economic empowerment.

Ownership of productive resources in family farms in Benin is predominantly male, particularly for agricultural land, which limits women's empowerment. Although women participate in the management of certain assets such as livestock and have access to forms of credit, their decision-making power remains limited, especially when assets are acquired through inheritance or donation. Limited access to resources and financing, combined with social norms, exacerbates gender inequalities in agricultural management and hinders the economic development of rural women.

In Benin's agricultural areas, control over income is predominantly male, although more than 50% of women participate in certain decisions related to the use of agricultural income. Women who are heads of households or owners of production have more power over income, while wives are often limited to expenses related to household care. Some women

develop savings and financial management strategies with the support of their husbands, strengthening their economic autonomy without challenging established social norms.

The empowerment of women in family farms in northern Benin remains a central issue in rural development dynamics. Based on data analysis, this discussion explores two key dimensions: the shift from attributes to capabilities among women farmers and a critical analysis of the application of the WEAI in the Beninese context.

In agroecological zones 2 and 3 of Benin, agricultural production spaces are marked by a confrontation between the practical needs and strategic interests of men and women. Local management systems remain dominated by men, whose legitimacy in production decisions reduces women's voices. This low female participation in decision-making and their limited autonomy in production reveal the limits of their empowerment in the agricultural sector.

Data show that women farmers possess valuable knowledge in product processing and marketing, as well as a good understanding of markets and community needs. Their involvement in production decisions is therefore essential to leverage their skills and integrate gender interests into agricultural spaces. Indeed, several studies emphasize that the ability to participate in decision-making is a key factor in women's empowerment.

B. Gnoumou Thiombiano (2015) takes the same approach to women's empowerment by presenting women's "participation" in "decision-making" as an essential element for women's empowerment. For him, women's participation in decision-making in relations between spouses, men and women, is an important and revealing issue in gender relations. For A. Benali (2016), women's participation in decision-making related to economic activities is a factor influencing their empowerment. According to the same author, the rate of participation of rural women in agricultural activities according to the socio-professional category of the head of household is higher in agriculture than in other types of activities such as crafts, trade in agricultural products, or when the husband has no profession, and these women are mostly considered "family helpers". This relatively high tendency for women to participate in decision-making in agricultural activities remains likely to be very little visible in agroecological zones 2 and 3 of Benin. G. Tagang & J-R. M. Rwenge (2023). In their work, they show that in Chad, women participate little in decisions in their households. Despite sociocultural barriers, their level of participation is closely linked to their level of education and economic activities that improve their status within the household. In the agricultural world, where very few women are educated, the obvious factor influencing their participation is economic activity, which enables them to hold a position in the decision-making space.

Asset management remains a major challenge for women farmers, especially those who want to access new forms of land use. In Africa and Benin, this management remains largely dominated by men, and the strong female presence on farms is not enough to transform social structures. Women have very limited control over productive resources, and their legitimacy to influence their territory remains weak. Conversely, the work of S. Basile et al. (2021) on Atikamekw women in Quebec shows that they play an active role in territorial decision-making, highlighting that women's aspirations to manage and decide are universal, even if the contexts differ.

Thus, the issue of women's access to and control over resources can only become effective in African agricultural areas when women participate financially in the acquisition of productive assets or resources. Furthermore, their participation should be driven by the evolution of structural and cultural norms towards more inclusive practices.

The application of the WEAI in the context of agroecological zones 2 and 3 in Benin has demonstrated its value, but also its limitations. The index has made it possible to assess aspects that are often considered separately in other studies by grouping them into areas of analysis such as ownership of productive assets or resources, purchase, sale, or transfer of assets, and access to credit. This tool provides a structured way of documenting the experiences of women in family farming in agricultural production, in the management of productive resources, and in income management. This combination of areas for a comprehensive analysis of women's empowerment in agriculture demonstrates the need for the tool.

Despite attempts to test the WEAI, there are limitations in the contextualization of the variables in the areas, which either have the same representation among women farmers or are insufficient to better assess the area. This is the case in the "production" domain, where the indicators "autonomy in production" and "contribution to decision-making" tend to converge among women. They believe that the basis for questions about women's empowerment and for cross-referencing the needs of men and women in the production domain would be "decision-making." For these women, autonomy in production is a direct result of their contribution. The same is true for control over the use of income, which is the only point of assessment in the "income" domain and reveals a limitation in the assessment of this domain.
In family farms in northern Benin, there are several sources of income that are co-managed to varying degrees by men and women depending on their sources. Women face a chain of inequality in income distribution that the tool does not allow to be accurately assessed.

The results of this research follow on from those of Y. Onibon Doubogan (2017), highlighting the structural weaknesses that limit the empowerment of women farmers in Benin, particularly in northern Benin.

Conclusion

This research, based on the multidimensional approach of the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), analyzed how women manage resources in family farms across the areas of production, resources, and income. The results reveal low participation by women in decisions making, resource use, and income control, reinforcing gender inequalities. This marginalization in decision-making bodies hinders their empowerment and can undermine the socioeconomic development of rural communities.

In the face of patriarchal systems and local modes of family farm management, which hinder the valorization of women's work, it is essential to rethink development.

B. Vachon & F. Coallier (1993) define development as "access to a way of life in which the individual is more important than the production of goods and services, and where personal and collective fulfillment is of greater interest than the role of consumer". This conceptualization of development invites us to rethink the position of women in decision-making bodies in order to validate their self-assertion and move towards empowerment.

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