
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking Gender Centres in Nigerian Universities

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| ABSTRACT

For the past three decades, discussions centred on gender equity have become buzzwords in academic institutions in Nigeria, which has led to an increasing effort to establish gender centres and adopt equity policies. Despite the awareness and presence of gender centres in Nigerian universities, institutionalising gender equity has been challenging. There is a struggle to explain how *policy absence* and gender centre *mergers* may constrain positive institutional gender change. This article explores why academic institutions have established gender centres but have not created gender policies. Taking into account the gender stakeholder's perspectives in two purposively selected universities in Nigeria, this study utilises an integrated feminist approach to investigate why university gender centres are unable to advance gender equity within the institutions. Concepts like *institutional resistance* and *layering* offered tools that helped capture the dynamics of institutional change and stasis in the case studies. Findings showed that the existence of gender centres without formalised policies is a window-dressing approach that limits the potential for gender equity within the universities. It also revealed how the redirection of gender centres through mergers with other centres is 'gendered'. Evidence showed that the prospect for institutional gender change is often tempered by merging incompatible and non-complementary centres. This study, thus, adds to the scholarly literature on institutional resistance, providing valuable insights into the subtle manifestations of resistance towards gender equity institutionalisation in academia.

| KEYWORDS

Institutional resistance, layering, gender centres, gender stakeholders, Nigerian universities, Gender policy

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in improving the understanding of institutional resistance, reproduction, and impediment to transformational gender change (Waylen, 2014; 2017). However, the limits of institutional change and how this occurs, especially in the context of Nigerian universities, are still weakly understood. The last three decades in Nigeria have witnessed concerted efforts to establish gender centres as a catalyst for promoting and strengthening teaching, research, documentation, and institutionalisation of gender equality across Nigerian universities (Igiebor, 2021). While these centres have gained visibility as teaching, research, and documentation centres, gender equity institutionalisation has failed to gain traction within the universities due to the absence of gender equity policies. Moving from this premise, I consider why university gender centres are unable to advance or institutionalise gender equity because of the absence of formal gender equity rules. This study's concern is echoed in contemporary feminist institutionalist thinking, which addresses how institutions can be sites of resistance and obstruct gender-positive change (Thomson, 2017).

2. An overview of UNIPORT and FUTA Gender centres

In this section, I present an overview of the University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT) and Federal University of Technology, Akure (FUTA) gender centres, which are the cases selected for this research. The UNIPORT and FUTA gender centres typically deliver academic teaching and research in gender studies engrained in specific challenges within African contexts. This implies a focus on

teaching and research in pursuit of equity/equality and justice in African contexts (Mama, 2009). With regards to staffing, the centres are headed by a director appointed by the Vice-Chancellor of the university. For example, the UNIPORT centre is headed by a director and supported by an array of academic staff domiciled within the centre. The overall responsibilities of the centre are geared towards academic teaching, consultancy and advocacy. In FUTA, the centre is headed by the director and supported by the associate director and other administrative staff.

An evaluation of the gender centres shows that the focus and mandates of gender centres differed. For example, at UNIPORT, the task is expressed as building capacity for sustainability through evidence-based teaching and research in peace, conflict and gender studies. In FUTA, the focus is on gender-based programmes, especially those relating to agriculture, technology and entrepreneurship disciplines. Unlike the UNIPORT gender centre (designed mainly as an academic unit), the FUTA CEGIST is designed to promote science and technology entrepreneurship and STEM programmes for females. While the role of gender stakeholders in these universities includes research, teaching, workshops, training and community service, they are not saddled with gender policy responsibilities, nor do they focus on promoting gender issues within the university. Typically, most of these centres run gender-related academic programmes, especially at postgraduate levels. In these universities, gender issues are embedded only in teaching and research—not in policy.

3. Literature Review

There is a growing interest in improving the understanding of institutional resistance, reproduction and obstruction of positive institutional gender change (Chappell, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Kenny, 2013a; Mackay, 2014; Mackay & Waylen, 2014; Waylen, 2014, 2017). For example, Thomson (2017) posited that FI scholars have questioned why institutions hinder greater women's representation (Kenny, 2013b); how informal institutions can inhibit progressive gendered change (Waylen, 2014), and why new institutions revert to older practices which can often signal regression on gendered norms (Mackay, 2014). However, the limits of institutional change and how this occurs, especially in the context of Nigerian universities, are still weakly understood.

Mergaert and Lombardo (2014) discussed resistance to gender initiatives in the European Union (EU) research policy using Feminist Institutionalism theory. The authors demonstrated that implementation had been hindered by individual and institutional resistance to gender mainstreaming. According to them, an organisation's culture, whether open or closed to gender equality, has repercussions for the degree of opposition faced in the gender mainstreaming implementation. Similarly, Stratigaki (2005) presented empirical evidence of institutional resistance to gender change within the European Council, suggesting that the potential for more radical gender mainstreaming has generated a strong resistance. Male-dominated decision-making bodies embraced the gender mainstreaming agenda and responded by eroding positive actions, thereby undermining the gender equality project. Where institutions have cultures that support male rights and power, gender mainstreaming initiatives can run up against opposition.

In exploring *mergers* as a limit to institutional gender change, I examine how the layering of the Centre for Conflict Studies impacts the Gender Centre, subverting the prospects for gender equity within UNIPORT. Mahoney and Thelen's (2010) assertion of layering is where new formal institutions are layered on top of the original ones. Layering occurs when new rules are attached to existing ones in the form of revisions, attachments and amendments and are, therefore, a less radical model of change (Madsen, 2019). Here, institutions are not wholly replaced or displaced but added to and modified (Waylen, 2009). Mahoney and Thelen (2010, 16) identified four types of institutional change—displacement, layering, drift and conversion—arguing that layering and “conversion” are more likely to be positive gender change strategies. Waylen (2017) also noted that layering new rules alongside or on top of existing ones allows for creating new governance structures with gendered effects and has been a relatively common way to change institutions. She argued that layering has probably been the most widely used institutional gender equity strategy and holds more promise for gender reform than others. However, she maintained that its effectiveness varied considerably in different contexts (Waylen, 2014).

Concepts like *institutional resistance* and *layering* offered tools that helped capture the dynamics of institutional change and stasis in the selected universities—the University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT) and the Federal University of Technology, Akure (FUTA). Scholars have suggested exploring resistance and opportunities institutions provide for feminist struggles in specific contexts and times (Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014). A focus on resistance to gender change can help identify why universities have gender centres but no gender policies that could aid positive institutional change. The importance of a functional gender policy in an institution cannot be overemphasised, as it is an invaluable tool for institutionalising gender equity. Even though UNIPORT and FUTA have established gender centres, the need to adopt a gender equity policy has been overlooked or primarily dismissed. With only having gender centres, can we say the intentions of its creators or university management towards gender equity are real and not just a window-dressing approach? There is, thus, a clear need to understand policy absence in these universities. The reasons behind this are yet to be explored; hence, this study.

4. Methodology

Three gender stakeholders were purposively selected for in-depth interviews from universities with only gender centres but no formal gender equity policy— UNIPORT and FUTA. The choice of the two universities was based on the following criteria: Webometrics and National Universities Commission (NUC) ranking of institutions in the country, size and type of university, years of existence, has a highly visible Equity Unit but no gender equity policy. The rationale behind the small sample size is to gain in-depth information from core stakeholders that provide a directional compass for roles, responsibilities, and expectations of the gender centres. As a result of the small interview sample and ethical requirement, the participants’ real names are not mentioned due to the risk of compromising the interviewee’s identity.

I integrated Feminist Institutionalism (FI) with Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to analyse the interview data collected. In particular, I employed the FI concept of *institutional resistance* and constructed questions from Lazar’s (2014) FCDA principle of ‘reflexivity of institutions’ to explore the absence of gender policies in these universities and how this limits institutional gender change (see Table 1). I ensured the FCDA questions aligned with the FI concept of institutional resistance.

Table 1: FI-FCDA Analytical Strategy

FI concept	Questions constructed from FCDA	FCDA principles used in constructing questions
Institutional Resistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there an awareness of feminist concerns for inclusivity? • Are feminist values used toward non-feminist ends? • Do the opportunities for women’s participation result in positive institutional change? 	<i>Reflexivity of institutions</i>

Integrating a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis with Feminist Institutionalism expands the understanding of resistance and reproduction, unveiling mechanisms that generate and regenerate institutional resistance towards gender equity change. In analysing gender policy absence, I identified barriers to gender equity efforts in UNIPORT and FUTA, explicitly naming them as *resistance*. Also, Historical Institutionalism’s concept of layering, particularly from Mahoney and Thelen’s (2010) framework, was utilised in this analysis. The concept of layering, in which new institutions are introduced alongside or on top of existing ones, was utilised to explore the merger of UNIPORT’s gender centre with the Centre for Conflict Studies.

To analyse the limits of institutional gender change in UNIPORT and FUTA, I pose this central question: Can examining policy absences and mergers provide new insights into the limits of institutional gender change? To answer this question, I highlight institutional resistance to gender equity and explore how layering—a form of institutional change strategy utilised by change actors for gender equity—is gendered and limits positive gender equity change.

5. Why create Gender Centres but have no Gender Policy?

Building on FI-FCDA, I questioned why institutional change, such as establishing gender centres, has not been enacted fully (adopting gender equity policies) in these universities. The interviewees highlighted the three dominant explanations for the non-adoption of gender policy within the universities: a lack of university management support for gender equity, an absence of gender activism/female gender experts, and the non-availability of funds. Based on responses on the first sub-theme—lack of university management support, two of the interviewees stated that:

From the onset, there has been no support for gender issues within the university; neither is the management interested in putting the gender policy in place. They know that the introduction of the policy would, in a way, force them to commit to gender equity, which would provide a leeway to distort gender imbalance in leadership positions. The management may not want that happening. They see it as competition or a threat. They think having a gender policy would be a way to feminise the university and give women an undue advantage. They believe that these policies and initiatives are tied to women. (Dr Nsi, UNIPORT)

Having a gender policy is subject to whether the management understands and support gender equality. Their passiveness towards gender issues can significantly impact the prospects of having a gender policy. (Layo, FUTA CEGIST)

Given the hierarchical nature of Nigerian universities and the power that reinforces the role of the Vice Chancellor (VC) in institutional decision-making, it is perhaps not surprising that the participants pointed to the VC as ultimately responsible for gender equity at their institutions. Gender equity policies and other gender mainstreaming policies are formal measures useful in promoting institutional gender change. As Gains and Lowndes (2014) emphasise, how *women's interests* are constructed depends heavily upon the political and institutional context. Those in academic leadership positions in male-dominated cultures have greater access to opportunities and mechanisms, such as the formal decision-making processes or legitimate authority (Hoerber, 2007), that allow them to influence dominant understandings of gender equity. Illustrating the critical role that the VC has in providing the vision and leading efforts for gender equity/equality, scholars claimed that when university management publicly supports and makes a personal and university commitment to equity, it influences others by sending out a strong signal that universities are committed to equality (Danowitz, 2008; Grenz et al., 2009). Mergaert and Lombardo (2014) argued that institutional resistance occurs when resistance is detected at a collective level and is connected to policy decisions on resources and priorities taken in an institution's higher ranks. Resistance to gender initiatives is a manifestation of power and can be expressed by acting and non-acting (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). In the case studies, university management's unwillingness to introduce and adopt gender equity policies exemplifies implicit institutional resistance.

Another interviewee argued that the absence of gender activism or influential female gender experts who could push for the adoption of gender policies in the university was also a factor. According to her:

I remember the issue of having a gender policy has been raised severally without much success. Gender activism in the university is shallow because we have only a few women in academic leadership positions interested in gender. If more women were well placed within the academic cadre, the push for gender policy would be worthwhile. (Layo, FUTA CEGIST)

The argument for the presence of gender activists or gender experts within universities is due to their significant role in influencing gender decisions, such as pushing for the adoption of gender policies and instituting initiatives that advance women to academic leadership positions. Squires (2008, pp. 195) argued that "gender experts" and "femocrats" within women's policy agencies have "come to be the privileged speakers for women's interests," thus promoting beneficial policies for women. The entrenchment of women's power within the institutional process is crucial, given the ambivalence of university management towards integrating gender issues into the university. Scholars have argued that policy adoption tends to be high with the existence and strength of feminist activism. This is because academic women who have access to respected academic networks, powerful allies, resources and spaces (i.e., are highly ranked members of academic committees, are seen as authorities in their fields or have powerful allies and supportive national/international networks) can deploy those resources to bolster attempts at gender policy adoption (Kahlert, 2017; Pereira, 2017). Weldon (2019) maintained that women's movements are important agents for transforming gender hierarchies. Therefore, it makes sense to say that women in academic leadership positions, especially those with gender expertise or a feminist background, open an enormous potential for cultural and structural change in universities (Peterson, 2019; Wroblewski, 2019). In the case studies, influential gender activists who possess much capacity to create and implement the gender policy (or get others to) were absent. As such, the movement toward positive gender change through gender equity policies has failed to happen in the universities.

The limited availability of funds from internal and external sources such as international and non-governmental organisations has also been an overriding factor highlighted by stakeholders as a significant reason for the non-adoption of gender policies. Two of the interviewees stated that:

With the current cuts in budgets from the state government, it is hard for the university management to keep up with demands from all corners. This has led to a prioritising of issues by the university management, and obviously, gender is not a priority for management. I believe the university management would want a gender policy to be in place but are constrained by the lack of funds. (Layo, FUTA CEGIST)

With just the gender centre in place, there are fewer expenses to be incurred in terms of staffing, projects etc. (Johnny, UNIPORT)

Adopting gender equity policies requires funds to implement some of the policy initiatives and action plans designed in the policy. In the absence of this, the existence of the gender centre alone is perceived as proof of the university's position and orientation towards gender equity. Therefore, it makes sense to say that having the gender centre alone was a safe option for university management to stay visible to a gender-related cause without having to expend its resources on implementing policy initiatives or action plans. The absence of funds or unwillingness to pursue avenues for funds and grants, provides the university management with powerful means to resist introducing or adopting the gender equity policy.

6. Gender Centre Mergers as a limit to Institutional Change

Going further, I explored the merger of the gender centre with the Centre for Conflict Studies as a way of understanding limits toward gender change in UNIPORT. At this point, I asked interviewees in UNIPORT about what had necessitated the merger of the Patience Jonathan Centre for Gender and Women Development Studies (PJC-GWDS) with the Centre for Ethnic and Conflict Studies (CENTECS) in 2015. This section explored the stakeholders' perceptions of the motivations for the merger. As De Klerk (2011) posited, the motivations behind institutional layering vary between contexts. They can result from one set of actors striving to maintain the status quo to new actors attempting to displace entrenched norms or values or as a complementary system of filling gaps in the institutional structure. Unravelling the contributing factors to the merger in the case studies aids the identification of limits to institutional gender change.

In response to the question, one of the respondents alluded that the merger was necessary because of the interdisciplinary nature of gender research and regional consideration. At the same time, the other emphasised political influence as a factor. While alluding to the collaborative nature of gender research, the interviewee stated that gender research is closely integrated with conflict studies, hence the merger. The assertion is that each centre's focus was similar, interlinked and interdependent, working closely with public participation in several projects, thus, necessitating the merger between the two centres.

With regards to the sub-theme on regional consideration and political influence, the contextual focus of FI facilitates an examination of how "past legacies inform institutional design and consequently, the lack of fit between intention and outcomes which is central to understanding institutional origins" (Chappell 2011, pp. 164). This is especially apt for the UNIPORT case, as the interweaving of regional historical legacies with informal norms and practices consequently affects the processes of gendered institutional change. Feminist institutionalists have found Historical Institutionalism valuable for understanding the role played by historical factors in resistance to institutional change towards gender equality (Clavero & Galligan, 2020). One of the interviewees argued that the university management had selected priorities that reflected the political and economic relevance of the region where the university was sited. He argued that the university management did not blindly merge the gender centre, as it aimed to serve strategic interests aligned with regional relevance. In other words, the gender centre was used towards non-gender ends. The interviewee had this to say:

By merging the centres, I believe that the University management selected priorities that address the current political and economic situation of the Niger Delta region. This is aside from the need to push for Internally Generated Fund (IGR) and sponsorship for the university. (Johnny, UNIPORT)

Findings showed that regional factors within the region had influenced the merger. There is a significant regional push for peace in the Niger Delta region where UNIPORT is situated. For over four decades, a series of conflicts rooted in the quest for resource control has been the bane of the region. The subsisting conflict situation is alleged to have stemmed from the clash of interests between the federal government, oil multinational companies, and the Niger Delta residents (Chinda & Amugo, 2010). In 2009, after concerted efforts to resolve the conflict within the region failed, the Yar'adua/Jonathan government announced an amnesty programme. Although the amnesty programme saw a large number of activists surrender their weapons in exchange for government training; this was short-lived as new militant groups such as the Red Egbesu Water Lions, Niger Delta Red Squad (NDRS), Adaka Boro Avengers, Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), and the Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force (JNDLF) emerged in 2016. These new groups started where the former militant groups left off with renewed bombing of oil facilities and abduction of oil workers (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2017). With efforts geared towards finding lasting solutions against militancy in the region, the merging of the centre appears to reflect regional considerations and priorities aimed at obtaining buy-in from the federal government, communities, multinational and corporate organisations located within the Niger Delta region. One such relationship led to the Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Center for Conflict and Gender Studies (CCGS) in 2018 to invest in peacebuilding, gender-related research and capacity-building in the Niger Delta region (PIND Foundation News, 2018).

The second interviewee believed that politics played a considerable role in the merger, especially considering that the gender centre was established by the wife of the former president, Patience Jonathan, and the centre was merged in 2015, which coincidentally was the year the president was voted out of office. According to her:

The centre may have been merged for two significant reasons. One explanation is that the exit of the president and his wife from the presidential office may have created fears that ongoing support for the centre would cease. The other reason, I believe, is political. The merger may have been strategically used to delimit efforts to create a gender-neutral university or make the other program (conflict studies) relevant. (Nsi, UNIPORT)

Merging as a political explanation featured widely in the interviewee's narrative. One of the arguments is that the regime change may have resulted in the merger. Prior to the merger, the centre enjoyed much attention from the office of the then First Lady,

Mrs Patience Jonathan. For example, the centre had a newly built building with infrastructural facilities donated by her. With the exit of the president and the First Lady from office, there were fears of funding support from the government through her, coming to an end. This meant that the centre's financial support through the office of the First Lady dwindled because of the president's exit from office. While the gender centre had been established by the president's wife, who possessed an unwavering amount of power at that time, the president's exit from office ultimately led to the centre being merged. This shows that the institution created (the gender centre) was not durable. The lack of durability of the centre indicates that the centre was unlikely to survive in the event of a change of government. The lack of continuity of projects is an underlying issue prevalent within the Nigerian political space (Ahmed & Dantata, 2016). In Nigeria, it is an observable norm that new leadership is often concerned with making its own impression. As such, past leadership policies and programmes are shelved or distorted if considered non-expedient (Chukwuemeka & Ugwuanyi, 2013). The succeeding administration rarely pursues its predecessors' policies, which explains the university management's fears regarding funding or support from the new administration since they did not create the project.

Another perception is that institutional resistance stemming from the presence of masculinist culture within the university may be a significant explanation for the merger of the gender centre. Scholars seek to understand how actors—institutional agents—purposively and intentionally create, maintain or destroy institutional arrangements to create or maintain privileged institutional positions and roles (Muzio, Brock & Suddaby, 2013). Sometimes, offices are created to absorb the loyalists of power holders, and after the expiration of their tenure, such offices fail to exist, or another successor would bring in their cronies, and the cycle continues. According to Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010), these *subversives* (institutional agents) disguise the extent of their desire for change by appearing to work within the system¹. However, the authors maintained that the new institutions could significantly impact the existing ones that they are alongside or on top of. The stance here is that change is brought about through actors utilising their power to capitalise on the openings created by fluctuating contextual circumstances by altering the agenda and institutional processes, thereby affecting processes of institutional change.

The case study revealed how change (merger) is gendered—through the redirection of the gender centre. From the evidence provided, the question arises: How does the institutional layering of the centre for peace and conflict studies with the gender centre affect the prospects for institutional gender change in the university? Scholars interested in the consequences of institutional layering have observed that the effects of institutional layering largely depend on the way institutional actors interpret and reproduce different arrangements in diverse situations and for different reasons (Felder et al., 2018). A significant implication of the merger is that the gender centre's mission is chewed up and spat out in barely recognisable ways by replacing attention to women's initiatives with less gender emphasis (Mannell, 2012). This implies that gender equity efforts within the university are subdued within the peace and conflict intervention. As a result of the merger, the centre for conflict studies gained prominence over the gender centre, thereby altering the gender equity prospects in the university. This, in effect, has led to a decline in support for women and/or gender issues, thus distancing the nuances of women's experiences.

Moreover, the goals of the centres merged or layered on top of each other are not complementary, thus, raising issues about the schism between the gender centre's intention and outcomes (De Klerk, 2011). As Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010) argued, the extent to which the new institution impacts the existing institution affects its success. While UNIPORT and FUTA have an established gender centre, the centres' goals are not directed towards institutionalising gender equity. Instead, the centres' activities are directed toward specific institutional interests, i.e., gender, peace and conflict (UNIPORT) and science and technology entrepreneurship (in FUTA).

7. Conclusion

Creating the gender centre alone (without a gender policy in place) is seen as a powerful strategic means through which the university management can circumvent formal gender rules and consolidate academic leadership advantages. Given the absence of gender equity policy in UNIPORT and FUTA, institutional gender change prospects are very limited. Aina argued that gender equity/equality is considered Eurocentric and strange to African essence, cultural values and ethics (2014, pp. 3). This explains why universities are not fully open to institutional gender change. For example, findings showed that having a gender centre without a gender policy is more or less a window-dressing approach—a strategic way to dismiss or resist gender change within the university. This study reflects Mackay's "liability of newness," which explained the stickiness of informal institutions, providing a powerful explanation for why it is hard to make gender reforms stick (2014). Establishing the gender centre alone, without a policy, shows the strategic way in which gender changes within the universities are dismissed or resisted.

¹ Subversives are change agents who "seek to displace an institution, but in pursuing this goal, they do not themselves break the rules of the institution" (Heijden 2010, 236). Subversives are mainly linked with layering, as they seek to bring change to the edges of an institution, which "make their way to the centre" (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, pp. 25–26).

Much of the literature on institutional gender change has focused on how layering is widely used as a strategy to achieve incremental gender change (Waylen, 2014). However, this paper draws attention to how layering is utilised as a strategy to limit or distort prospects of institutional gender equity change. For example, the UNIPORT case exemplifies how change (merger) is gendered—through the redirection of the gender centre. The merging of centres to serve specific political and regional interests, provides an underlying mechanism for resistance toward institutionalising gender equity in the UNIPORT. These political and regional interests stem from years of regional historical legacies (in the Niger-Delta region) which have remained sticky and difficult to change despite clear awareness of gender equity (evidenced by the establishment of gender centres). The creation of new institutions through layering has been widely used as a gender change strategy (Krook, 2006), where it is supposedly assumed that change will be achieved incrementally through this. However, evidence from UNIPORT showed a gendered form of layering, manifested through the merger of the gender centre with the Centre for Conflict Studies. When the Centre for Conflict Studies merged with the existing gender centre, the opportunities for gender equity offered by the gender centre were limited. The merger shows gender equity focus being undermined in the peace and conflict goals. The analysis of the empirical realities of layering provided valuable insights into the limits of institutional gender change (Minto & Mergaert, 2018), especially in universities without gender equity policies. Therefore, this calls for rethinking gender centres within Nigerian universities. This study recommends that gender centres should not only be recognised as research/academic units but also tasked with promoting gender issues within the universities and saddled with gender policy implementation, monitoring, and evaluation responsibilities.

This study is limited in its sample size and focus, as it investigates informal institutional arrangements in universities without gender policies. A comparative study that explores the limit to institutional gender change in universities with gender policies and universities without gender policies would be an interesting area for further research.

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