

Emotional Abuse from Intimate Partner on Women's Perceived Stress

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Abstract

Intimate partner emotional abuse is a pervasive yet often overlooked issue with profound psychological and physical consequences. Unlike physical abuse, emotional abuse is more subtle, encompassing manipulation, humiliation, isolation, verbal insults, and persistent criticism. These experiences can erode a woman's autonomy, self-worth, and mental health, contributing to heightened perceived stress. The present study aimed to assess the relationship between emotional abuse and perceived stress among women in Karukutty Panchayat, Ernakulam district, who were currently or previously in intimate relationships. A quantitative descriptive research design was employed, and convenience sampling was used. Women aged 18–60 were eligible, excluding those unwilling to consent, residing outside the district, or undergoing current treatment. Data were collected using two standardized tools: the 28-item Emotional Abuse Scale and the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10). Findings indicated a significant positive correlation between emotional abuse and perceived stress—higher abuse levels were associated with greater stress levels. These results underscore the need for targeted awareness campaigns, effective screening strategies, and the inclusion of emotional abuse assessments in routine psychiatric evaluations. Emotional abuse should be recognized as a serious form of domestic violence, warranting equal attention as physical abuse. The study's implications extend to policymakers, social workers, and mental health practitioners, emphasizing the importance of early detection and intervention. Future research could explore the long-term effects of emotional abuse and develop resilience-building interventions to mitigate stress among survivors.

Keywords: *Emotional abuse, Perceived stress, Intimate partner violence, Women's mental health, Domestic violence*

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1. Introduction

Intimate partner emotional abuse is a serious problem that frequently goes unnoticed, while having serious psychological and physical effects. Compared to physical abuse, emotional abuse is more subtle and may include manipulation, humiliation, isolation, verbal abuse, and constant criticism. A woman's sense of autonomy, self-worth, and mental health can all be negatively impacted by these events, which can raise her perceived stress levels. Understanding the connection between women's perceived stress levels and emotional abuse committed by an intimate partner is the main goal of the current study. This study attempts to investigate the degree of emotional abuse that women endure and evaluate how these experiences lead to elevated stress perceptions, which in turn affect their general mental health and quality of life. Both independent and dependent variables are included in the study, the former is emotional abuse, while the latter is perceived stress. The primary objectives of the research were to assess the socio-demographic details of the participants, to measure the prevalence of Emotional abuse experienced by women from their intimate partner, to find out the perceived stress of the participants analyze the association between Emotional abuse and perceived stress among women.

The research population consisted of women in Karukutty panchayat in the Ernakulam district who had been in, or were currently in, an intimate relationship. The convenience sampling method was used in this and this study excluded women Individuals aged of 18 and over the age of 60. Participants who are not willing or unable to provide informed consent. Women who are living in another district. Women who are currently

Receiving treatments are not included in this thesis. A quantitative research approach was adopted using a descriptive research design. Two standardized scales were used to collect

data The Emotional Abuse Scale, consisting of 28 items. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), a well-established 10-item instrument, was used to measure the perceived stress levels of the participants. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between the two variables. This indicates that as the level of emotional abuse increases, the level of perceived stress also tends to rise. The study has important ramifications for lawmakers, social workers, and mental health professionals. It highlights the significance of increasing awareness, using appropriate screening methods, and incorporating emotional abuse into normal psychiatric assessments. According to the study's findings, emotional abuse is a strong indicator of women's stress levels and has to be taken just as seriously as other types of domestic violence. Future research may expand on these findings by examining long-term effects and developing intervention techniques aimed at reducing stress and promoting adaptability in women who have been subjected to emotional abuse.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To assess the socio-demographic details of the participants
- To analyse the association between Emotional abuse and perceived stress among women.

The current study explores emotional abuse experienced by married women aged 18 to 60 from their intimate partners, and the perceived stress resulting from such experiences. Conducted in the Karukutty panchayat of Ernakulam district, Kerala, the study adopted a quantitative, descriptive research design with a sample size of 60 participants. Emotional abuse was measured using the Emotional Abuse Scale (Simmons & Lehmann, 2013), comprising 25 items. Perceived stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale developed by Cohen et al. (1983), which

includes 10 items. Key study variables include emotional abuse, perceived stress, and intimate partner dynamics.

3. Prevalence and Nature of Emotional Abuse

Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being (PWB) was used to measure the various dimensions of PWB. According to Ryff (2006) autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance are the six dimensions of psychological wellbeing. Autonomy refers to ability for self-determination, independent decision making, resistance to social pressures and regulation of behaviour from within and evaluation of self by personal standards. Environmental mastery refers to competence in managing the environment, control on external activities, best use of surrounding opportunities and ability to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values. Personal growth refers to a feeling of continued development, growth, expansion, self-knowledge, effectiveness and improvement in self and behaviour over time, openness to new experiences and a sense of self-realization. Positive relations with others refer to warm, satisfying and trusting relationships with others, give and take of human relationships, concern about others' welfare, and capability of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy. Purpose in life refers to a sense of goals and directedness in life, meaning to present and past life, and aims and objectives for living. Self-acceptance refers to a positive attitude toward the self, acceptance of multiple aspects of self, including good and bad qualities and feeling positive about past life (Ryff, 2014).

Ryff scales of psychological wellbeing was circulated online among the student social workers along with the consent form for voluntary participation in August 2021. The study was undertaken through several online classroom settings. Each item of the psychological scale was explained to the students in the classroom. Before the online survey, the informed consent form

which formed the first section of the online survey form was explained to the students.

In the informed consent form, the confidentiality of the information collected was guaranteed and the rights of the participants of the study with regard to their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research were ensured. They were also informed through the consent form that the information collected would be used for presentation in national and international conferences and publication in national and international journals. Out of the 104 students who were given orientation about the study, 50 students consented and filled in the online form properly. Their responses were collected through a google form and analysed with the help of statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). Major findings of the study have been tabulated and analysed. Scoring for each dimension as well as overall psychological wellbeing was done. On the basis of the aggregate scoring, the respondents were divided into three groups with low, moderate and high level of psychological wellbeing.

After the online survey, the students were also given instruction about the self-scoring of the scale. PWB, being a self-reporting scale, could be scored by the participants themselves for improving their self-understanding. The overall findings of the study in tabular forms were shared with the students and they were informed about the counselling services available at the Institute through the counselling helpline. Since the students were attending the classes from remote locations, they could avail the services of the counselling helpline run by the Institute.

4. Prevalence and Nature of Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse, often overlooked due to its non-physical nature, has been increasingly recognized as a pervasive form of

intimate partner violence (IPV). It encompasses verbal assaults, threats, controlling behaviors, social isolation, humiliation, and coercion (Breiding et al., 2015). Globally, studies have shown that emotional abuse is one of the most common forms of IPV. For example, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey reported that nearly half of the American population had experienced emotional abuse from their partners (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2008). Similar trends are reflected in Ireland, where three times more women reported emotional abuse than physical abuse (Women's Aid, 2012).

In the Indian context, cultural norms and patriarchal family structures often legitimize emotional abuse. Many women are socialized from early life to be submissive and accommodating, leading to normalization of verbal and emotional control by male partners (Mshweshwe, 2020). Emotional abuse often manifests in controlling behaviors such as restricting social interactions, surveillance, and regulating movement or appearance (Chikhungu et al., 2021; Gervais & Davidson, 2013). Humiliation, another key characteristic, includes verbal insults, belittling appearance, and public or private shaming (Kosterina et al., 2021). These abusive tactics not only undermine women's autonomy but severely damage their self-worth and confidence.

5. Perceived Stress among Women Experiencing Emotional Abuse

Stress is a common psychological response to adversity, but in emotionally abusive relationships, it becomes chronic and debilitating. Victims often live in constant fear of criticism, rejection, or future abuse, which compounds their stress levels (Anitha, 2018). Studies indicate that emotional abuse significantly contributes to psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Yun et al., 2019). Chronic exposure to stress-related hormones

due to trauma affects key brain regions involved in decision-making, memory, and emotional regulation (Teicher & Samson, 2013).

Women in abusive relationships may experience internal conflict, self-doubt, and a sense of entrapment, especially when they are financially dependent or have children to care for (Moono et al., 2020). Social stigma, cultural expectations, and fear of losing custody often prevent women from leaving abusive environments, further amplifying their psychological burden (Frazão et al., 2014). Research also highlights the compounded stress for women who lack social support, which increases vulnerability to depression and poor coping outcomes (Southwick et al., 2005).

6. Association between Emotional Abuse and Perceived Stress

The relationship between emotional abuse and perceived stress is both direct and cyclical. Emotional abuse acts as a chronic external stressor that can overwhelm personal coping mechanisms, especially in the absence of social or institutional support (Eckhardt & Parrott, 2017). Victims often internalize abusive behaviors, leading to lowered self-esteem and learned helplessness, which increases stress levels (Mechanic et al., 2008). A study by Sackett & Saunders (1999) found that psychological abuse had a more profound impact on fear and depressive symptoms than physical violence. Moreover, constant verbal aggression, intimidation, and emotional manipulation result in hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, and avoidance behaviors—all classic signs of PTSD.

Physiological evidence suggests that stress responses in emotionally abused women are more severe and prolonged. This includes elevated cortisol levels, sleep disturbances, and long-term implications such as fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue (Van

Houdenove et al., 2001). Emotional abuse is also significantly linked to the onset and persistence of mental health disorders like generalized anxiety disorder, depressive episodes, and suicidal ideation (White et al., 2024). According to Roeckner et al. (2021), trauma resulting from IPV can alter brain function in ways that impair decision-making and emotional regulation, further entrenching stress.

Additionally, attachment styles within intimate relationships have been found to moderate the impact of abuse. Relationships between two insecure partners were most likely to involve emotional abuse and show the highest stress outcomes (Wilson et al., 2013). Thus, perceived stress can be both a product and a perpetrator of emotional abuse, often trapping victims in a cycle of mental distress and relational dysfunction.

7. Sociocultural Factors Influencing Abuse and Stress

Sociocultural elements deeply influence both the occurrence of emotional abuse and how women perceive and respond to it. In patriarchal societies, religious beliefs and cultural narratives around marriage often discourage women from reporting abuse or seeking help (Ellison et al., 2007). Women's roles are traditionally tied to family honour, which silences their suffering to protect household reputation.

Economic dependence is another critical factor. Women without income or education are less likely to leave abusive situations, intensifying their stress and prolonging exposure to trauma (Bornstein, 2006; Katerndahl et al., 2021). Moreover, gendered power dynamics—where men dominate decision-making in relationships—further reinforce emotional abuse and limit women's capacity to cope or resist (Centers et al., 1971).

8. Causes and Impact of Emotional Abuse in Women

Emotional abuse in intimate relationships is a complex and pervasive phenomenon with severe consequences for women's

mental and physical well-being. Abusbaitan et al. (2025) identify four core characteristics of emotional abuse—intimidation, control, humiliation, and apathy—based on a systematic review of 102 studies. They emphasize that recognizing these features is vital for improving women's health outcomes and designing effective interventions.

Fontanesi et al. (2024), drawing on data from Italian participants, highlight jealousy, dominant personality (DP) traits, and age as significant predictors of emotional abuse. Their findings suggest that women experience higher rates of emotional abuse, while men are more likely to tolerate or perpetrate it, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive prevention programs. Suzanna and Sinha (2023) examine the mediating role of self-compassion in abusive relationships in India. They find that self-compassion can reduce learned helplessness, a common response among emotionally abused women, thereby serving as a potential therapeutic target.

Studies from diverse contexts such as Malawi (Chikhungu et al., 2021) and rural Africa (Jina et al., 2012) show that socio-cultural norms, economic dependency, and patriarchal structures significantly influence abuse patterns. In Malawi, 42% of women reported experiencing abuse, with financial dependence and controlling behaviours as key contributors. Jina et al. (2012) found a strong association between emotional abuse and negative health outcomes, including suicidal ideation and depression, in rural communities.

The intergenerational nature of abuse is evident in findings by Watiti (2021), who shows that emotional abuse moderates the relationship between childhood adversity and adult IPV experiences. Similarly, Godoy-Ruiz et al. (2015) demonstrate how past trauma and migration-related stress amplify the mental health impacts of IPV among Latin American women in Canada.

Several studies underscore the serious mental health consequences of emotional abuse. Karakurt et al. (2014) found high rates of suicidal thoughts and self-blame among women in shelters, while Örmon et al. (2014) reported lasting psychological impacts, such as hopelessness and self-doubt. Catabay et al. (2019) emphasize the moderating roles of resilience and social support in mitigating perceived stress and its effects on PTSD and depression.

Tiwari et al. (2018) link emotional abuse to adverse reproductive outcomes, while Follingstad & Edmundson (2010) show that emotional abuse is often underreported despite significant emotional tolls. Similarly, Zavala & Spohn (2010) highlight how economic hardship, status incompatibility, and alcohol use increase the risk of emotional abuse.

Other studies such as Temple (2006), Walker (2006), and Woods (2005) demonstrate the cumulative psychological impact of abuse, including PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Cultural and ethnic variations also play a role, as seen in Baldry's (2003) study of abused immigrant women in Italy.

Overall, these studies collectively reveal that emotional abuse is not only widespread but deeply damaging. It is influenced by gender roles, social norms, economic dependency, and past trauma, and its impacts are long-term, ranging from poor mental health to reproductive complications. Addressing emotional abuse thus requires a multifaceted, culturally informed, and trauma-sensitive approach.

9. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design using a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between emotional abuse by intimate partners and perceived stress among women. The research was conducted in Karukutty Panchayath, located in the Ernakulam district of Kerala,

targeting women aged 18 to 60 who were currently or previously in intimate relationships. A purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants, based on their availability, accessibility, and willingness to participate. All participants were married women residing in the Panchayath area. A total of 60 participants were included in the final sample.

Participants were eligible if they were aged between 18 and 60, had experience in an intimate relationship, and provided informed consent. Women who were under 18 or over 60, not in an intimate relationship, currently undergoing psychiatric or psychotherapy treatment for issues related to intimate partner violence, or residing outside Karukutty Panchayath were excluded from the study.

Data were collected using two standardized tools: the Emotional Abuse Scale (EAS) developed by Simmons and Lehmann (2013), which includes 25 items assessing emotional abuse by intimate partners, and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Cohen et al. (1983), comprising 10 items measuring perceived stress levels. A pretest was conducted with five married women from the local community to assess the clarity and cultural appropriateness of the tools. Based on the feedback, minor modifications were made, and the questionnaires were translated into Malayalam for better comprehension.

The primary data were gathered through self-administered questionnaires distributed to the selected participants after explaining the purpose of the study. Secondary data, drawn from relevant journal articles, books, and online resources, informed the literature review. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to interpret the data, and the findings were presented in tabular form to enhance clarity and understanding.

10. Analysis

Table 1. Overall Psychological Wellbeing of the Students

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age category		
18-25	6	10.00%
26-35	17	28.30%
36-45	20	33.30%
46-60	17	28.30%
Total	60	100.00%

The data shows that most respondents (33.3%) are in the 36–45 age group, followed by equal proportions (28.3% each) in the 26–35 and 46–60 categories. Only 10% fall within the 18–25 age range. Overall, the sample is mainly composed of adults aged 26–60, with fewer younger participants.

Table 2. Educational qualification of the respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Educational Qualification		
Below 10th	1	1.70%
SSLC	7	11.70%
Higher secondary	28	46.70%
UG and above	24	40.00%
Total	60	100.00%

The results show that nearly half of the respondents (46.7%) have completed higher secondary education, making it the largest group. This is followed by 40% who hold an undergraduate degree or higher. A smaller proportion (11.7%) have completed SSLC, while only 1.7% fall below the 10th standard. Overall, the sample is predominantly educated at the higher secondary level and above.

Table 3. Occupation of the respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Occupation		
Daily wages	7	11.70%
Professional Job	17	28.30%
Housewife	21	35.00%
Permanent both private and government	15	25.00%
Total	60	100.00%

The data shows that the largest group of respondents are housewives (35%), followed by those in professional jobs (28.3%). About one-fourth (25%) are employed in permanent positions in either the private or government sector, while only 11.7% work in daily wage jobs. Overall, most participants are engaged in non-daily-wage occupations, with a notable proportion being housewives.

Table 4. Duration of the Marriage of the Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Duration of marriage		
Less than 5 years	20	33.30%
6- 15 years	21	35.00%
More than 15 years	19	31.70%
Total	60	100.00%

Most respondents (35%) have been married for 6–15 years, followed closely by 33.3% who have been married for less than 5 years. About 31.7% have been married for more than 15 years. Overall, the distribution shows a fairly even spread across all three categories, with a slight majority in the mid-duration marriage group.

Table 5. Types of Marriage of the Participants

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Type of marriage		
Arranged marriage	46	76.70%
Love marriage	14	23.30%
Total	60	100.00%

The majority of respondents (76.7%) were in arranged marriages, while only 23.3% had love marriages. This indicates that arranged marriage is the predominant marital type among the participants in the study.

Table 6. Results of the correlation between emotional abuse and perceived stress.

Dependent variable	Test	Variables	
		Total_PS	EA
Total_PS	Pearson Correlation	1	.392**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.002
	N	60	60
EA	Pearson Correlation	.392**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002	
	N	60	60

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

H0: There is no significant relationship between emotional abuse and perceived stress.

H1: There is a significant relationship between emotional abuse and perceived stress

This table shows that a test was conducted to check if there's a connection among Perceived Stress (Total_PS) and Emotional Abuse (EA) among the participants. The analysis includes 60 participants. The Pearson Correlation is used to assess the

degree to which these two factors are related. The correlation coefficient (r) between Perceived Stress and Emotional Abuse is 0.392. This indicates a moderate positive correlation between the two variables. (Sig. 2-tailed) is 0.002, which is less than 0.01, indicating that this is significant as denoted by the double asterisks (**). The positive correlation means that as emotional abuse increases, perceived stress also tends to increase. In simple terms, people who experience higher levels of emotional abuse are likely to report higher levels of stress. Emotional abuse could contribute to stress, but there can be other elements in action as well. There is a moderate and significant relationship between emotional abuse and perceived stress. This suggests that emotional abuse might be a key factor contributing to stress levels among the participants. This finding highlights the psychological impact of emotional abuse on stress levels among the respondents. These findings provide statistical support for the hypothesis that emotional abuse contributes to higher perceived stress.

11. Major Findings

- Most women in the study were aged between 36-45 years (33.3%), followed by those in the age groups of 26-35 years and 46-60 years (both 28.3%). Only 10% were between 18-25 years. The smallest representation comes from the 18-25 age group (10%), suggesting fewer young women participated in the study.
- Regarding education, 46.7% had completed higher education, and 40% had a university degree or higher. A smaller group (11.7%) had completed SSLC, and only 1.7% had below 10th-grade education. The high percentage of women with higher education and UG degrees suggests that education might play a role in awareness of emotional abuse and its impact on stress.

- In terms of occupation, 35% were housewives, 28.3% were employed in professional jobs, 25% had permanent jobs in private or government sectors, and 11.7% worked as daily wage labourers.

12. Social Work Implications

- Social worker can play a key role in identifying, addressing, and preventing emotional abuse in intimate relationships. By working closely with affected women, social workers can provide a safe space for disclosure, emotional support, and stress relief interventions
- By providing age-related interventions, younger women may benefit from awareness programmes and early counselling by focusing on healthy relationships and recognizing emotional abuse of older women in overcoming long-term emotional trauma.
- Develop programs that involve families to address abusive behaviours, promote conflict resolution, and improve family dynamics.
- Targeting less educated women through community engagement can improve their access to resources and support systems.
- Encourage open conversations within families about healthy relationships and emotional well-being.
- Social workers can offer premarital counselling to help couples understand one other's emotional needs, establish clear boundaries, and communicate openly. Teach couples how to respect one another's feelings, speak respectfully, and resolve conflicts without placing blame. In order to avoid emotional or control issues, they establish a strong foundation.
- Social workers should collaborate with schools and community organizations to develop and implement educational programs that promote healthy relationships,

respect, and gender equality among children and adolescents. These programs can help prevent future emotional abuse by addressing harmful gender norms, teaching emotional literacy, and encouraging non-violent conflict resolution from an early age.

- Social workers should help women who have been subjected to emotional abuse get access to vocational training programs and jobs. Social workers can assist women to become less vulnerable to abuse and gain the ability to make their own decisions by increasing their financial autonomy and self-sufficiency.
- Emotional abuse often goes unnoticed and unreported, leading to a high level of perceived stress among women. The social worker can intervene through individual counselling, like social case work, support groups (social group work), and community awareness to understand their rights and develop coping mechanisms.
- Social case work can be applied to address the psychological effects of emotional abuse, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. By helping women build emotional resilience and personal strengths. The social worker can contribute to stress reduction and mental well-being.
- Working in social groups gives women an opportunity to exchange stories, lessen social isolation, and develop group strengths. Group settings may greatly lower perceived stress by assisting survivors in learning from others, gaining social support, and having their feelings validated.
- Raising awareness of emotional abuse, lowering stigma, and promoting laws that safeguard women in close relationships can all be accomplished via community organization and social action. To provide coordinated

interventions for emotional abuse, social workers can cooperate with law enforcement, healthcare systems, and local organizations.

- Family counselling and psychoeducation can help address dysfunctional relationship patterns and promote healthier communication strategies. Social workers can work with both survivors and family members to create supportive home environments.
- Social workers can also help women access legal, financial, and housing resources, particularly for those who wish to leave abusive relationships. Such practical support plays a major role in reducing stress and promoting long-term safety and empowerment.
- Social workers can use social media, podcasts, or videos to teach people about emotional abuse and how to stay emotionally healthy. This is important because many people may not know what emotional abuse looks like or may feel afraid to talk about it. By sharing helpful messages online, social workers can reach more people, especially young ones, and help them understand that they deserve respect in relationships. This also encourages those who are being hurt to speak up and get help.

13. Conclusion

Intimate relationship emotional abuse is a serious but frequently ignored issue. Despite advancements in many areas, many women still experience emotional manipulation, verbal abuse, domineering behavior, and loneliness in intimate relationships. Unlike physical abuse, emotional abuse is often unreported and unnoticed, but it has a significant negative impact on a woman's psychological health and raises her perceived stress levels. In addition of differences in sociodemographic characteristics including age, education, and marital status, emotional abuse and stress levels were consistently concerning, indicating that

emotional abuse is a pervasive problem that affects women from a variety of backgrounds. Stronger intervention techniques are necessary.

The lack of substantial protection from family structures like parental or in-law support, even though many women reported managing using internal resilience and little outside assistance. Women's coping mechanisms, which frequently included emotional repression, avoidance, dependence on social help, and withdrawal, were also emphasized in the study. These coping strategies, however, did not address the underlying causes of misuse and had minimal efficacy in reducing chronic stress. This highlights the urgent need for legal advocacy, emotional support networks, awareness- raising initiatives, and early intervention. Identifying emotional abuse, assisting survivors, encouraging safe reporting channels, and pushing for legislative reforms all depend on social work intervention. Initiating community education, providing counseling services, and working with local leaders can all be crucial in changing societal perceptions and creating safe environments for women. This research contributes to the current understanding of emotional abuse and its impact on the mind, highlighting the significance of a multifaceted approach. To safeguard women's mental health and emotional safety in close relationships, it is imperative to improve mental health services, strengthen support networks, and address sociocultural norms that encourage silent suffering.

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