

Gender Sensitivity or Gender Content?: Gender Mainstreaming Curricula and Promoting SDG 5 at a Tanzanian Teachers College

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Introduction

Although conceived of as enlightened spaces of learning and progress, universities worldwide remain sites at which gendered marginalization, discrimination, and violence thrive (Simpson & Fitzgerald 2014; Boyle et al. 2017; Mama & Barnes, 2007). In spite of this, universities are sites of professionalization and critical thinking, providing an interesting space for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). On the one hand, the SDGs can be fostered and taught; on the other hand, universities can practice the SDGs from within, reaping benefits for students and staff alike. In the case of SDG 5—gender equality and female empowerment—there is much progress to be made from within. Since the 1990s, gender mainstreaming (GM) has been used internationally as a tool for promoting gender equality, taking into account women and men’s experiences and positionality when designing policy, as well as analyzing the effects that policies subsequently have on women and men. Not only has GM been used in national and international policy discourse, but it also constitutes a framework through which academics have studied gender and higher education, pairing it nicely with SDG 5.

In the context of Tanzania, challenges to equality and empowerment include lack of parity in the ratio of female and male students, particularly in the sciences, as well as imbalance among academic staff members. More qualitative issues including unequal student participation, lack of safe accommodation, and sexual harassment/exploitation also persist. Although universities inherit challenges from the primary and secondary levels, they nonetheless have a responsibility in redressing and eliminating inequalities. As long as universities remain such problematic spaces, the transformative power of higher education is limited.

The teachers college about which this study is concerned boasts a Gender Policy with a number of goals, including gender mainstreaming its curricula. This paper will explore academic staff members’ perceptions of this policy goal. More specifically, the paper will interrogate the meaning of gender mainstreaming curricula, exploring perceptions to both gender sensitive/responsive curricula and curricula containing gender content. This study’s results—as well as close examination of existing literature—show that there are important distinctions between these two forms of gender mainstreaming curricula. These results illustrate the need for policy specificity when implementing gender mainstreaming in curricula in higher learning institutions.

Literature Review:

Gender Inequality in Tanzanian Universities

In the case of Tanzania, perhaps the most visible gender inequality is the quantitative imbalance in the enrollment of female and male students, with females constituting 35% of total enrollment (The United Republic of Tanzania, 2011:96). In science and math disciplines this gap is exacerbated (Bipa, 2010:67). Various affirmative action measures have succeeded in increasing enrollment of female students in

Tanzania over the past two decades, but these programmes have not resulted in increased socioeconomic diversity. (Onsongo 2009; Lihamba et al. 2006). The quantitative disparity is similarly present among teaching instructors, with males dominating academic staff rosters, as well as prestigious and decision-making administrative positions. Furthermore, other discriminations among students and staff which are more difficult to quantify, including unequal student participation, sexual harassment and sexual exploitation, as well as lack of safe and secure accommodation at or near universities persist (Bennett et al. 2007; Lihamba et al. 2006). Studies show that these quantitative and qualitative inequalities and discriminations are not without links, feeding into and propelling each other (Bennett et al., 2007; Bennett 2009; Marshall et al., 2014).

Many cite challenges at the secondary school level in Tanzania as responsible for the continuing imbalance in university enrollment. Indeed, the number of female students continuing from ordinary-level secondary school (O-Level) to advanced-level secondary school (A-Level, requisite for university admissions) is fewer than males statistically; while female and male enrollment in Forms 1-4 are at parity, females represented approximately 39% and 37% in Form 5 and Form 6, respectively, in 2016 (The United Republic of Tanzania, 2016:89-90). Although O-level secondary school education was made free in 2015 (Human Rights Watch, 2017:8), there have been other setbacks. In June 2017, Tanzania's current President John Magufuli decided to bar pregnant girls from returning to public secondary school following delivery ("Tanzania: JPM Closes Debate On Teen Mothers," 2017). Additionally, child marriage remains a practice in certain parts of the country despite being in contradiction with certain national laws (Human Rights Watch, 2017:32). The persisting inequalities and challenges at the secondary school level thus present a veritable challenge to universities, but these national struggles do not preclude universities from the responsibility of creating equitable environments for students and staff alike.

Universities and the SDGs

Universities have been framed by international bodies as part of the development agenda since the early 1990s; in the case of sub-Saharan Africa, higher institutions of learning have also been regarded as postcolonial sites of nationalization and growth (Mama 2006: 54). It is thus easy to imagine how tertiary education plays a role in advancing the SDGs. It is worth briefly distinguishing, though, between higher institutions of learning which directly endorse the SDGs in their policies or actions and those whose actions do not specifically cite the SDGs. The differentiation is important given that the former constitutes explicit SDG endorsement while the second is analysis of the institution through an international development lens. In the case of this paper, the latter is true: the SDGs do not appear in the college's Gender Policy, nor did they feature in the data collection materials. That being said, the Gender Policy cites a number of national policy goals and actions, positioning the university tightly within national and international development discourse.

Gender Mainstreaming Curricula in Universities

Since the 1990s, GM has been a tool with which global and local development practitioners and activists attempt to promote gender equality on a policy level. In 1997, the UN General Assembly defined GM as follows:

[It is] the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal

spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.

Given the broad definition of GM, it is unsurprising that its application to higher education is wide: GM has been used as the lens for analyzing both qualitative and quantitative challenges in higher education—indeed, the majority of articles cited earlier in this paper use GM as a theoretical framework. Increasingly present in the literature is inquiry and exploration of GM and curricula specifically.

The rationale behind the interrogation of gender and curricula is “hidden curricula,” the idea that while curricula is presented as a neutral concept, it is a product of an inherently gendered and misogynistic society, therefore resulting in content and teaching which typically enforces rather than challenging norms (Mama, 2006; Cassese and Bos, 2013). Bishop and Sambrook (2000) propose using the logical framework to facilitate the Department of Women and Gender Studies’ process of GM at Makerere University; the plan which includes a section on “Curricula, Instruction and Communication,” under which is listed “Integrate gender into curricula, Ensure methods of instruction are gender sensitive, Establish and enforce a gender inclusive language policy” (244).

Mama (2006) theorizes that “efforts to mainstream gender in the curriculum development and teaching of existing discipline-based course take two main routes. The first involves bringing gender into discussion and posing new questions in the existing discipline-based teaching. Secondly it involves the introduction of new areas of study” (69). Cassese et al. (2012) differentiate between gender as a descriptive and analytic concept, positing that isolating gender to a descriptive category in curricula is limiting. Alongside theoretical discussion of GM and curricula are case studies illustrating concrete successes and challenges of mainstreaming gender into curricula. Verdonk et al. (2008) detail various Dutch medical institutions’ process of mainstreaming gender into curricula, focusing on methodological and institutional barriers. Focusing on the political science discipline, Doherty (2013) problematizes the “add and stir” concept of GM, conversely proposing gender mainstreaming curricula through experiential learning. A comparison between the American Anthropological Association’s efforts in the late 1980s to gender mainstream curricula with various efforts by the American Political Science Association shows how support from the top is necessary for true institutional change (Atchison, 2013).

In the sub-Saharan African context there has been more theorization on gender and curricula than policy implementation and experimentation (Morley, 2007), and scholars writing about the region have recently pointed out a lack of focus on the topic of GM and curricula. Morley (2010) notes that GM has rarely included “service delivery, e.g. introducing gender into the curriculum,” and Mama (2006) states that “another area which has yet to be seriously addressed is that of curricula transformation, within which matters of power, pedagogy, and content are located.” Indeed, the bulk of case studies focusing on successes and failures in particular disciplines seem to be conducted in high-income, western countries. In the East African and Tanzanian context, there is scant literature on GM and curricula, illustrating a need to focus research in this area.

Rationale & Research Questions

The Gender Policy of the college about which this study is concerned includes a section regarding scope; it states explicitly that the policy applies to “all pedagogical processes including formulation of curricula, teaching, supervision, and assessment” (Gender Policy, 2016:12). When it comes to curricula, the Gender Policy includes the objective of “providing guidelines that will enable the college to mainstream gender

in the curricula programs and projects to ensure they are gender sensitive.” It is stated that the college “shall continue to mainstream gender in all academic programmes, research and consultancy activities,” of which one of the strategies includes “review[ing] all the DUCE curricula for gender responsiveness.”

In light of this policy, as well as literature which makes clear that challenges to mainstreaming gender vary by institution, the research questions are as follows:

- ◆ How do stakeholders—namely academic staff—think gender can be mainstreamed in curricula?
 - ⊖ What constitutes gender sensitive/responsive curricula, according to academic staff?
 - ⊖ Are academic staff receptive to the idea of having more gender content in curricula, via modules or courses?

Methodology

All research conducted for this paper was approved by Trinity College Dublin’s ethics board, as well as by local supervisors in Tanzania. Participants of focus group discussions and interviews were informed of the nature of the study as well as their rights before being asked to sign a consent form.

Two focus group discussions were conducted: one mixed focus group discussion with five Assistant Lecturers, and one same-gender (male) focus group with three Assistant Lecturers¹. The researcher recruited widely for the focus group discussion, getting in touch with the large majority of Assistant Lecturers.

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine academic staff members: this sample consisted of three academic staff members from each of the three faculties and each level of the teaching hierarchy—Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, and Head of Department. Respondents were selected randomly, although when only one female occupied the academic staff position in a particular faculty, she was selected by default in order to acquire approximate gender parity in the interview sample. Subsequently, five male and four female academic staff members were interviewed. Academic staff members who had organized or presented at a recent gender conference hosted by the institution were excluded from selection for focus group discussion participation and interviews². The reasoning was that because conference organizers and presenters represent the minority of academic staff members, they do not necessary reflect the norm when it comes to awareness of gender issues.

Combining the focus group discussions and interviews, a total of 17 academic staff members’ insights comprise the data set for this paper. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo. For the purpose of anonymity, participants have been randomly numbered, one through nine for one-to-one interview participants and one through eight for focus group discussion participants. The methodology and results discussed in this paper comprise only a portion of the data collected, as data used in this paper is part of a larger data collection looking at stakeholders’ perceptions of the college’s Gender Policy.

Limitations

This research was conducted over the course of a 10-week period, near the end of the semester and during the examination period at the college, imposing a time constraint upon the researcher. In order

¹ It was unintentional to have an all-male focus group.

² One error was made here, resulting in a conference presenter being selected for interview in the randomization process.

to mitigate the limitations of time duration and busyness of academic staff, I conducted almost all focus group discussions and interviews before the examination period began.

Secondly, focus groups were smaller than intended. Because many Assistant Lecturers were away pursuing their doctorate degrees and were not present at the college full-time, it was difficult to succeed in getting a large group together.

Finally, my positionality as a researcher must be acknowledged. It is difficult to anticipate or project the ways in which my identity may have affected participants' responses, but as a white westerner who does not speak Swahili, I was regarded as a privileged outsider. In order to emphasize the collaborative rather than extractive nature of the study, I reiterated my affiliation with the university's Gender Unit, explaining that the office would receive and retain all data collected during the project and use it in an independent manner. Additionally, for transparency, all participants were offered to receive a copy of the results of the study via email, in the form of a report provided to the two institutions.

Results

Gender Responsive/Sensitive Curricula

In the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, academic staff members were asked how they think the formulation of curricula and/or curricula could be gender responsive/sensitive. While the responses varied, the most common response, coming from five staff members, was that various stakeholders should be included in the process of formulation of curricula. For a few respondents, including both female and male academic staff in the process of curricula formulation would be important:

There are two things that I think can be done, maybe trying to include women in those formulation of curricula, those committee, which formulates them, so that we have female thought. Not only we men thought about the programme, but also female side. Because the way women view the world and the way men view the world might be different (Respondent 6).

Other respondents focused less on the *formulation* of curricula per se and more on curricula itself; in their opinion, gender sensitive/responsive curricula are more about how curricula might stipulate gender sensitive processes:

...I don't know if you can say that you can have a different curricula, I don't think so. I just think that you need to revise mechanisms of how this curriculum accommodates different needs, not necessarily on the content but probably the way it is delivered [emphasis added] (Respondent 2).

...the orientation of most of curricula captures not only the methodology of doing the curricula, but also captures most of the activities that we target for the learners. Now, these two combined leads to the desired outcome from the curricula. Now we shouldn't very much tone down the issue of gender when it comes to the activities that are spelled out in the curriculum (Respondent 4).

A couple respondents posited that gender sensitive/responsive curricula would be one free from discriminations, with one mentioning the importance of eliminating any gendered stereotypes present

as well as eradicating what (s)he called “stigmatizing bias.” One respondent stated, for example, that there should be more protection of pregnant students present in the curricula so that pregnant students can continue—rather than postpone—their studies:

We have female students here. And these are mature students. You see sometimes they are pregnant, they have babies. But then we should develop our curricula in such a way that also take into account of these people. Like for example, we don't have a provision if these students have delivered their babies during the semester... the only thing these people can do is postpone studies. Now under that kind of a situation, we are not sensitive. But for to be sensitive, there could be a provision for them to get some kind of individual teaching...[so that] at least they do not repeat a year simply because they were pregnant (Respondent 9).

On the other end of the spectrum, there were four respondents who expressed that curricula are either already gender sensitive or that they could/should not be made gender sensitive. Interestingly, one respondent also gave the example of pregnant students but in contrast to the respondent quoted above stated that these cases should be handled on a case-to-case basis between the student and professor with no formal stipulations in curricula:

I have about two three students, female students who are pregnant. So when you go to the class, you see, you have to treat them differently. Because they have special requirements because of their conditions...[but] you cannot write here that pregnant students should be treated differently. If you know that you are a student, you know that you cannot handle both of the duties at the same time, why do you get pregnant? Why don't you wait until you complete your studies? (Respondent 3).

While there was clear stigma against these pregnant students on the part of the respondent, Respondent 3 justified her stance through her concern that gender sensitivity/responsivity in curricula may cause feelings of inferiority. Another participant felt similarly:

I have a problem with putting description somewhere that this is how you do, this is how you inculcate gender issues in what you do in your teaching and everything else. Because the moment you do that, you subconsciously say you have got a weaker member, and you have to help this because this member is weak (Respondent 8).

Gender Content in Curricula:

When asked how formulation of curricula/curricula could be gender sensitive/responsive, only three respondents mentioned the incorporation of gender content as a subject to be taught: one respondent based in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences noted that female authors could be incorporated into literature courses; another made reference to the interdisciplinary subject of Development Studies and said the discipline could incorporate more “topics that perpetuate or that encourage women to participate in any job, in any activity” (FG Respondent 7); finally, one interviewee suggested home economics curricula as a means of attaining gender sensitivity, further indicating the many ways in which gender sensitivity may be interpreted—and used to engrain rather than combat traditional gender roles:

When we are forming any curriculum, specifically not in science, but in Education or Humanities, there should be some courses or curriculum which can make even a good

housemaker... So when we are talking about home sciences in BS stage, that means you are really involving girl students more (Respondent 5).

Thus, only a minority of responses to gender sensitivity/responsivity and curricula focused on gender content being incorporated into course materials. Respondents were later asked directly if they think there should be more gender modules or gender courses at the college³. Interestingly, no respondent stated opposition to the idea of having either more gender modules or a gender course, indicating an overall positivity toward the idea. A few respondents mused that a gender course would be more beneficial, as it would be able to go into more depth. Another respondent noted, though, that his vision is much broader:

Actually having one module is not sufficient. It's not enough. Or even having one course is not enough. To me, if you are to ask me what the best way is, I would do it this way: we have a package, it could be a module. And this module is integrated in all the courses, and actually the instructors, the teachers know how to best to integrate those gender issues, whether I am teaching introduction to educational psychology, whether I am teaching research methods, whether I am teaching every course that I am teaching, I know how to mainstream gender in that. That would have been there (Respondent 9).

Respondents were also asked in which three faculties of the college the gender modules/courses would appear. Over half of the total respondents stated that increased gender modules or a gender course could happen across all faculties. Only two respondents expressed skepticism in regards to incorporating gender content the Faculty of Science, but it is worth noting that they did not state that Faculty of Science students should *not* be required or able to take modules or courses on gender in other faculties. Perhaps most interestingly, when asked if there should be more gender modules or a gender course at the college, a few respondents noted that it is already happening:

...in other courses, although they're not straightforward teaching gender, indirectly we discuss about the gender inequality. For example, in literature, when you analyze books, whether it is a novel, drama, whatever, the gender issues...So, indirectly, we discuss them (Respondent 3).

Even at the moment with the current curriculum, people can still link issues with gender. I am an economist, but we link that to gender issues. We know and understand empirically that if you want households to improve, then you empower women and the rest will be fine (Respondent 8).

...gender issue is being studied in one of the courses, sociology of education. And the people who are taking the course, sociology...it's an optional course (FG Respondent 1).

Discussion

Discussion: Gender Responsive/Sensitive Curricula

There was a wide range of responses regarding gender sensitive/responsive curricula. Such diverse

³ Currently there is only one official gender module at the college, located in a core curriculum class housed by the Department of Development Studies.

responses indicate disparate understanding of this terminology and its application to curricula. During a number of focus group discussions and interviews, the interview question about gender sensitivity/responsiveness and curricula was met by a sustained silence or request for clarification; it is possible that some respondents were even confused or unsure of what “gender sensitivity/responsivity” means. While several terms, including GM, gender equality, and gender equity are defined in the college’s policy, gender sensitivity/responsivity is not, and I consequently made the decision not to define them formally on the interview questionnaire. Throughout this paper, and in the questionnaire, the terms “gender sensitive” and “gender responsive” have been used jointly due to their synonymous use in the college’s Gender Policy. In summary, it is unclear to what extent the diversity of responses regarding curricula and gender sensitivity is due to widely varied understanding of terminology or whether the disparate responses would have nonetheless remained present had there been a definition provided explicitly in the interview.

Even the literature on gender sensitive/responsive curricula is general or scant. Verdonk et al.’s case study mentions a “digital knowledge centre” available for educators “to retrieve gender sensitive educational material, such as case-based study assignments, presentations, or exams” supporting the idea that pedagogical tools can be gender sensitive, but the article does not go into detail about how exactly these materials are gender sensitive (2008:e196). Cassese et al. discuss methodological and analytical mainstreaming strategies—including political bibliography and case study assignments, Gender-related applied homeworks [sic]—but do not frame these strategies as gender responsive or gender sensitive. On the topic of female involvement and voice, Morley notes that women are often perceived as more gender sensitive “on account of their lived, gendered experiences rather than their theoretical knowledge of feminism,” potentially lending credence to the importance of including women in the curricula formulation process. In summary, there is little literature examining what it means for curricula to be gender sensitive.

Discussion: Gender Content in Curricula

While there was a general positivity toward the idea of having more gender modules or courses, this does not necessarily indicate tangible commitment or the expertise to teach gender content, which Morley (2007) calls the “tension between democratization and expertise (12). As an example, one respondent was supportive but noted that s(he) does not see how gender could necessarily be incorporated into her/his particular discipline, history. Perhaps more dangerously, it is possible that some interpret gender sensitivity or incorporating gender content as implementing that which reinforces rather than challenging the norm, as is the case with the respondent who suggested the creation of a home economics degree at the college.

Respondents mentioning existing gender content in curricula bring a new meaning to this idea of “hidden curricula”: is there already curricula teaching gender which is unacknowledged or absent from the formal, written curricula? This inclusion is positive, but even if this is the case, the lack of codification of gender content in curricula indicates invisibility, not to mention unsustainability of such content.

Discussion: Gender Sensitive Curricula Versus Gender Content in Curricula

Emerging from the data is a distinct difference between gender-sensitive curriculum and gender content. While I myself somewhat differentiated between these two concepts in the questionnaire—by first asking participants how the curricula/formulation of curricula could be gender sensitive and later asking their opinion on increased gender content in modules or courses—participants had the opportunity to

spontaneously mention gender content when first asked about gender sensitivity/responsivity and curricula (which only three did). Moreover, the question about curricula and gender sensitivity proved more polemic than the question about incorporating gender into more modules or creating a course, indicating that the topic of gender may be more and more normalized (especially as a descriptive construct) but that examining processes for gender sensitivity may be more controversial.

In any case, the divide in the data is interesting, especially in light of the contents of the college's Gender Policy. Further textual analysis of the policy reveals ambiguity on what it means to mainstream gender in curricula. Recall that the policy states the goal of "providing guidelines that will enable the college to mainstream gender in the curricula programs and projects to ensure they are gender sensitive." This particular sentence of the Gender Policy implies that mainstreaming gender content into curricula ensures gender sensitivity; and yet, gender content rarely emerges in the data when respondents are asked what it means for curricula to be gender sensitive. So, is that which is gender sensitive gender mainstreamed? On the one hand, gender sensitivity in curricula does constitute GM, through the examination of processes to eliminate biases and diverse voices and promote equality. On the other hand, curricula which is gender sensitive in its formulation or execution is not necessarily teaching gender from a descriptive or critical perspective, potentially limiting the extent of GM.

In the literature, these distinctions exist but blur together under the umbrella of GM; they do not constitute the primary topic of discussion or analysis. Verdonk et al. (2008) states that "in medical education, GM is both a matter of content and process and does not consist of linear phases between research, policy production, and implementation," illustrating a subtle difference between curricula content and subsequent processes but also that these two things are couched between other purposes of GM. Bishop & Sambrook (2000), as well as Mama (2006) delineate the most clearly between gender content and gender sensitive processes. Recall that Bishop & Sambrook detailed in their logical framework a three-part plan to "integrate gender into curricula, ensure methods of instruction are gender sensitive, and establish and enforce a gender inclusive language policy." Mama (2006) does not use the terminology "gender sensitivity," but at least distinguishes between gender mainstreaming teaching processes and creating what she calls "new areas of study" (69). There is somewhat of a lack of cohesion in the literature on the implementation of gender mainstreaming policy to curricula in higher education.

Recommendations & Conclusion

This research shows the multiple visions that academic staff stakeholders have regarding gender mainstreaming and curricula. Not only were there multiple ways in which academic staff conceived of curricula being gender sensitive/responsive, but these concepts evoked enthusiasm, negativity, and sometimes confusion. Simultaneously, most academic staff members were receptive theoretically to the idea of having more gender modules or courses at the college.

The ambiguous use of terminology in the college's Gender Policy, coupled with a wide variation of responses among a small sample size illustrate the necessity for clarification on gender sensitivity/responsivity. While it is not necessary for the college to modify the existing policy to include a definition of gender sensitivity/responsivity, the Gender Unit should agree upon a definition of the term for any who may inquire, so as to establish a unified stance on how the college views gender responsiveness/sensitivity. Moreover, consensus must be achieved on how the college wants to gender

mainstream curricula, either by rendering its processes gender sensitive or incorporating gender content into more modules or courses or both.

In the event of making teaching processes “gender sensitive,” academic staff members need training, which would require conversation with various stakeholders to build conception of how various processes—curricula and subsequent teaching, supervision, assessment—are (or are not) gender sensitive. Conversely, in the event of creating more gender modules or a gender course, it would be necessary to identify professors who are qualified and willing to create and teach such courses. Preliminary results in the broader study shows that modifying the curricula’s contents at this particular college would prove difficult, as it is a constituent college and all modifications must pass through the parent university. While existing curricula are difficult to change, though, new degree programmes being created by the constituent college *can* contain gender-related content. Despite limits to curricula modification and creation, the college can also work toward ensuring that the execution of curricula—in teaching, supervision, and assessment—are gender sensitive/responsive, although this would not entail official modification of existing curricula. The Gender Unit at the college must thus determine where best to channel existing resources.

When it comes to promoting SDG 5, gender equality and female empowerment, in higher learning institutions, the question regarding curricula is the following: should curricula be gender responsive or should gender content appear in the curricula? These are two concepts which are not entirely mutually exclusive but between which clear distinctions can and should be drawn, which is not the case in the existing literature. While gender content in curricula would ostensibly be gender sensitive, that which is gender sensitive does not necessarily contain gender content. In the face of insidious and persisting discriminations at the secondary school level in Tanzania, universities should not accept the continuation of various biases but actively fight against them. In addition to combatting gender discrimination, the university must actively promote gender equality, not only to improve students’ university experience but also to allow for gender awareness at the tertiary level to reap positive benefits in students’ future lives and occupations, thereby perpetuating further gender equality and empowerment.

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