

# ŽENSKE V OBOROŽENIH SILAH: MED NASILJEM IN RANLJIVOSTJO

## WOMEN IN MILITARY SYSTEM: BETWEEN VIOLENCE AND VULNERABILITY

**Povzetek** Prispevek poskuša združiti vprašanje posledic napačnega razumevanja in tolmačenja ranljivosti žensk ter vprašanja negativnega vpliva spolnih stereotipov in predsodkov na položaj žensk v vojaškem sistemu. Emancipacijski vidik v kontekstu vprašanja žensk v vojaškem poklicu in žensk na kriznih, bojnih (vojnih) žariščih in v kriznih situacijah je soočen s posledicami vpliva negativnih spolnih stereotipov in predsodkov, ki so jih oblikovale in favorizirale zahodne družbeno-religijske agende, in posledično izzvan z vprašanjem razumevanja ženske kot ofenzivnega in defenzivnega vojaškega orožja. V popularnem diskurzu se namreč ženska telesa, menstrualna kri in ženska seksualnost zaradi učinkovitosti združevanja predsodka nevarnosti žensk z nevarnostjo narave pogosto uporabljajo kot vojaška taktika. V tem smislu bi lahko ranljivost ženskih teles razumeli v kontekstu tistih, ki so zlorabljeni in podvržena nasilju nasilnih drugih (moških, sistema itn.).

**Ključne besede** *Žensko telo, ženska seksualnost, ranljivost, predsodek, religija, vojna.*

**Abstract** The paper brings together perceptions and concerns about the practical consequences of the misconceptions of the concept of women's vulnerability and the question of negative gender stereotypes and prejudices regarding women in military profession.

The emancipation viewpoint within the context of women in the military profession and women confronting combat (war) situations and equivalence, is introduced within the universal orientation of the impact of negative gender stereotypes and prejudices formed and perpetuated within religion-society cycle and confronted with the issue of understanding women as both offensive and defensive weapons of war.

Within popular discourse, women's bodies, menstrual blood, and female sexuality can be used as tactics of war because of the potency of their association with the

danger of nature. To that extent the vulnerability of women's bodies could be understood as the one being violated and abused to violet others.

**Key words** *Women's bodies, female sexuality, vulnerability, prejudices, religion, war.*

## **Introduction**

The question of a woman, of her role in the society is still inexhaustible and more and more present subject of different psychological, sociological, social and other scientific researches and debates. The whole society is faced with new view of a woman and also of a man. The world is in the middle of the important place of transformation or new valuation and formation of gender's identity. At that point the institutionized religion plays an important role, as a meaningful system for producing the meaning is (so)responsible for (non)ethical behaviour of society and vice-versa. The culture and religion are not just the area of passive influences but also a meaningful system for producing the meaning. The culture and religion give the notions, the beliefs which become unnoticed and non-rectified patterns by which the people live by. That is why in the sphere of cultural society beside the positive life phenomena also negative gender stereotypes and prejudices are formed and we absorb them non critically. The important role here have the religions which, according to Majella Franzmann, are the main key which in individual social-political structures open the door to harmful gender stereotypes and prejudices and consecutively to a patriarchal mentality (Franzmann, 2000, p. 60). Stereotypical conceptions which are linked mostly to gender stereotypes have a very important role here. These stereotypes have a destroying influence on the comprehension and notion of oneself, of the other gender and consecutively of all relations. They are creating a distance between a man and a woman and the ideal of symbiosis of gender differences and respectful-harmonious relation between sexes. Negative gender stereotypes and prejudices encourage, preserve and tolerate patriarchal hierarchical marks of human relations and spread class hierarchy of power on every field of life. Innocent patriarchy's parasites live and transfer through the language, images and thoughts. Negative gender stereotypes and prejudices paralyse and prevent healthy mutual relations. These are heart and health of a person, of partner and family relations and also of the whole net of relations and society. Healthy relations mean healthy society and vice versa.

The question of parity and equality of women and men in a view of the impact of negative gender stereotypes, is one of the basic and complex questions which our era has to think about. Because the more we non critically accept the norms around us, the more we become limited: victims of our environment, less capable to doubt about the beliefs which were unconsciously taken from our environment. That is why it is important to find a liberation from life's captivity in which the people live as passive products of this culture.

This problematical feed introduce the paper in the sense of ethical model: two integrities of a man and of a woman which are two different totalities and from constructive differencies it is not possible to create a relation moreworthy – manly

and lessworthy, which in the past has always been womanly. The modern progressive conception and understanding of gender order is certainly rather significantly related to the issue of socio-cultural paradigm of power and power distribution. The present paper also results from the progressive view that the roles of men and women were mainly shaped by influences arising from the history, culture, society, religion and therefore change as the society itself changes.

The starting point of the approach in the paper is problem based. The emancipation viewpoint within the context of women in the military profession and women confronting cobat (war) situations and equivalence, is introduced within the universal orientation of impact of negative gender stereotypes and prejudices formed and perpetuated within religion-society cyrcle and confronted with the issue of understanding *women as both offensive and defensive weapons of war, a notion that is symptomatic of age-old fears of the “mysterious” powers of women, maternity, and female sexuality.* (Oliver, 2007, p.19).

Soo, the research question of these paper is the urge to trace possible connection between the impact of the negative gender stereotypes on comprehension of women in military profession. The basic hypotesis would be that universal orientation of the impact of negative gender stereotypes and prejudices formed and perpetuated within religion-society cyrcle has strong negative impact on understanding of women as both offensive and defensive weapons of war.

## **1 NEGATIVE GENDER STEREOTYPES, PREJUDICES REGARDING WOMEN IN MILITARY PROFESSION**

Anthropological and ethnographical research indicates that between human activities are very few of those who would be, in all human cultures performed exclusively by male or exclusively by female. Although there are a whole range of cultures, of which there is a strict division of labor between the sexes, but the views on which the work is male and which female, are usually very different. Equal work or acitivity can in some culture applies to extremely masculine and in other to extremely feminine gender role. One of the few exceptions is fighting because we can not cite a single living culture in which women had in it equally important or even more important role than men.<sup>1</sup> The military profession until recently, certainly was considered as exclusively male profession, and as Igor Kotnik-Dvojmoč has pointed out, it was not only because of the objective complexity of the profession, but also for tradition, stereotypes and prejudices. (Kotnik-Dvojmoč, 2002, p. 33) Igor Kotnik-Dvojmoč also reveals particular attention of the impact of negative gender stereotype of the “relationship between the concept of masculinity and heroism”. In addition, he claims, that the general code, which assessed the members of the battle group is still “to be a man”. It is also one of the easiest ways

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<sup>1</sup> Among the 122 cultures that were analyzed in terms of who produces the weapons, there was only one found in which women sometimes participate in this work. (Makarović, Žvokelj, Kromar, 1986, p. 36)

to encourage soldiers to implement a completely irrational procedures in the fight, which can also lead to certain death; with the reference to their “masculinity” being put into question as the crucial element. The man, according to Kotnik-Dvojmoč, is much more afraid of losing masculinity as women fear their loss of femininity. This is probably due to the fact that it is necessary to prove “real manhood, or real masculinity” with achievements. Moreover, men are much more pronounced need to prove their masculinity through various roles and profession. (Kotnik-Dvojmoč, 2002, p. 33)

The hardest issue for women in the military profession is to resist traditionally and culturally conditioned opposition. Due to culturally marked stereotypical gender roles men are thought aggressiveness through socialization, while women are constantly thought non-aggression. In line with this, the male ego requires to keep themselves protectors. Musek is also convinced that the observed differences between the members of both sexes reflect the life situation, the process of socialization and experiences that prevail in a given environment. Quite clearly these differences are expressed through gender roles and performances, the individuals during development creates about their sexual identity, stereotypes and roles. On the other hand, it is again difficult to defend the impression that gender roles and gender schemes are not completely independent of the actual nature and objective characteristics of members of both sexes. However, the marginalization of women in the military profession, is the result of the predominance of male centered culture. (Musek in Kotnik-Dvojmoč, p. 34)

Women entering into public activities, that were considered as exclusively men, is still very limited. The cult of masculinisation, which is dominated by a strict principle of exclusivity, commands women to be considered as “outsiders” and represents a negative phenomenon in a man’s world. Women’s professional career is, despite numerous attempts of emancipation, still largely dependent on traditional prejudices and cultural norms. Although in the last forty years, women massively penetrated in so called “man’s world of army” of Western European and North American armed forces, women in the military occupation which applies to be “most male centered profession” are still burdened with strong impact of prejudices and negative gender stereotypes. These prevent them from equal opportunity to perform a profession of a soldier without barriers. Instead, they must cope with the remarks of their fellow men that contain negative stereotypical idea of women as dependent, helpless, weak, man’s slave property. For the reason of “threats to his manhood” male soldiers repeatedly disable and make difficulties to their female colleagues. Thus, for example. Slovenian soldier that wants to remain anonymous says: *I often receive various ridicule accusations by male colleagues. Perhaps even worse, however, I find the comments and reactions of other people when I tell them that I am a professional soldier.* (Furlan, 2005, p. 189) Undoubtedly, this is due to the gender stereotype of specific gender role played by a woman imprinted in the collective consciousness of our society. On the other hand, military colonel Damjana Jurkovič, responds that she did not think of feel any disadvantages of

being a woman among her male colleagues in the workplace. In connection with the question of the presence of prejudices about women in the army or military occupation, she argues: *In 1991, there were none (prejudices), because the war made us equal. (...) In the following years, gender differences and prejudices began to appear, but I can say for myself, that in my surroundings, I have never felt them. The differences may be traced when command responsibility comes into question ...* (Jurkovič, 2003, p. 26)

The reason for increasing number of women who, despite of the impact of negative gender stereotypes and prejudices opt for military occupations, could be seen mainly in new roles and tasks of the armed forces. With the spread of non-war military operations in which the military performs the role of peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian tasks in aid during natural disasters, the interest of women to military profession increases. These tasks often take place in areas where the military crisis has passed, or even in environments where there is no threat of use of military force, and allow the participation of a large number of women. These tasks do not assume great physical strength and the use of weapons, but on the contrary, requires the large capacity of the negotiations, understanding of different cultures, understanding the civilian population in the area of operations ... Soo called "machomilitarism" trend, which we are familiar with from some of the modern aggressive armies, is nothing but cultural cockpit cover to the soldiers in peacekeeping operations. Feminization of the military, is not understood only in terms of the increased number of women in the military, but also brings with it a qualitative change. Feminization of army presupposes re-conceptualization of masculinity and transformations of gender identities and relations between them, and thus the ability and willingness of the acts of violence has dramatically dropped. Feminization of the military also brings new perspectives to the conception of masculinity. It also brings liberating concepts that break down prejudices such as: brave fighters do not cry, fear or retreat. With the entry of women into the army and the units on the front lines, such samples are disrupted. It is permissible for a man to cry, allowed to consider whether it is wiser to attack or retreat. By changing the definition of courage and fear transformation of the operation in the frontline occurs as well. This is precisely what bothers some military experts which believe that the presence of women reduces the effectiveness of the army. Greater presence of women reduces combative intentions of the army and this helps to lower glorification of violence in the army, and consequently also in wider society. In this regard, Maca Jogan questiones whether feminization of the armed forces may be a first step towards changing patterns of everyday life in the direction of decreasing violence and as an agent of mutual coexistence. (Jogan, 2002, p. 24)

Despite of increasing involvement of women in the military occupation, women are far from equal with men, which is mainly reflected in the functional (inequality in access to tasks and their implementation) and positional (inequality in the dynamics of acquiring rank and level) differentialisation of women. Igor Kotnik-Dvojmoč concludes that the problem of functional differentiation and positioning

of women in the military occupation, both in its quantitative as well as qualitative aspect, reaches such a magnitude that it would be appropriate instead of using term differentiation for labeling this phenomenon entitled to use term discrimination. (Kotnik-Dvojmoč, 2002, p. 58) We could conclude that women in a male-designated occupation of soldiers, are therefore visibly exposed to non-equal distribution of power, discrimination and negative impact of gender stereotypes and prejudices, and all this is also manifested in the form of disadvantage in promotion and payment. Kelly Oliver alerts: *Even as the presence of women in the military seems to signal their liberation from patriarchal traditions, the rhetoric surrounding their involvement betrays the lingering association between women, sexuality, and death.* (Oliver, 2007, p. 19)

And this connection is especially noticeable in the phenomenon of vulnerability.

## 2 WOMEN'S VULNERABILITY: VIRGIN / SEDUCTRESS, LIFE / DEATH, PEACE MAKER / WARRIOR

Fearing women's power and authority, even Christianity often made women scapegoats and subjected them to men. In his work *Violence, Society and the Church*, Gerald A. Arbuckle arrives at similar conclusions and points out the patriarchy as the oldest form of supremacy of one gender over another, that is, of men over women (Arbuckle, 2004). He believes that gender oppression stems from deeply rooted anti-women prejudices preserved and strengthened throughout history. And the origin of all these prejudices and the patriarchy as an oppressive form of power and men as possessors of power, is – in the opinion of anthropologists Edwin Ardener and Sherry Ortner – to be sought in men's feeling of loss of power and inferiority. The two anthropologists argue the following thesis: in pre-modern cultures pregnancy and birth were understood as spheres of dangerous secret wrapped in a veil of mystery. Despite or perhaps precisely because of this, the phenomena of pregnancy and birth aroused envy among men, as they made them feel helpless. The fact that men could seemingly establish and determine the rights related to the offspring had to kneel down in front of the actual ability to create a life, which was outside men's power. Precisely because of their lack of this capability or power (to bear children) men pushed women aside and confined them to the wild sphere of nature, while assigning other men the superior position in the area of social decision making and order. Women were thus ousted from the orderly social world of decision making and public social life, with their wild nature representing the main obstacle and excuse for men to chase them away from this sphere. Consequently, women's position in the society became marginal and only restricted to their primary function, which was supposed to be ensuring procreation, that is, bearing offspring (Arbuckle, 2004, pp. 39-40). Femininity, woman and her body become extremely vulnerable.

The root of the word vulnerability is the Latin *vulna*, which means "wound". The term is used in a variety of ways: economic, geopolitical, emotional. In one side it

describes the fragility of our bodies, and the terror, confusion and fellow-feeling that can come from our perception of our shared embodiment. As Sarah Hagelin refers “both to the physical fact that a thin layer of skin separates the inside of our bodies from the outside world and also complex structures of feeling in this case those that define our sense of ourselves as vulnerable”. (Hagelin, 2013, p. 13)

Kate Brown summarizes three distinct but interrelated concerns about the practical consequences of the concept of vulnerability: (1.) vulnerability is a patronizing, paternalistic, and oppressive concept; (2.) vulnerability becomes a premise for an instrument of social control; and (3.) vulnerability has stigmatizing and exclusionary consequences. (Brown, 2011, p. 316)

Through the body, we are exposed, opened onto the world and to others, even as for others we are the ones to whom they are exposed and vulnerable. In this sense, vulnerability is universal, an inevitable part of embodiment. Or in the words of Judith Butler: “the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency an instrument of all these as well”. (Butler, 2004, p. 26) The theme of vulnerability is implicit in all Butler’s work, yet it is treated most directly in *Precarious Life*. Butler’s idea of precarity, which is politically conditioned and precariousness as “the condition of being conditioned” is definitive of life itself and reveals “life as a conditioned process”. (Butler, 2006, p. 23) Precariousness is akin to an existential sense of finitude in that it emphasizes the fragility of existence, but it serves a different purpose. Precariousness calls our attention to the way any of us might be substituted for another. Understood in this way precariousness is an ungrounded ground for “positive social obligations”. (Butler, 2006, p. 22) To the extent that I am vulnerable and my life is precarious, it is also because I am bound to others. Social bonds condition my existence.

The other possible understanding of vulnerability would be also the one that deals with emotions. Psychoanalyst, philosopher, feminist Julia Kristeva describes vulnerability not primarily as the result of having bodies that can be wounded, but rather exists because we occupy a place between being and meaning, between bodies and words. And precisely this gap between bodies and words, the ways in which words are never quite adequate to capture bodily experience, is figured as a wound. And according to Kristeva, this wound is the seat of our vulnerability. She suggests that the encounter with others puts us face to face with our own vulnerability with and for others. In this view, it is the fear and denial of our own vulnerability that causes us to hate and exploit the vulnerability of others. (Kristeva, 2010, p. 115)

Vulnerability in this sense, usually means a system of beliefs, images and narratives that imply a capacity to be harmed (either physically or emotionally). Generally the word has also implied a powerlessness or victimization that strips from our understanding of the term, especially in regard to images of the female body. Or as

Erinn C. Gilson has stated *female vulnerability is manifest in the way women are portrayed as submissive, powerless objects that are acted upon and often harmed by men.* (Gilson, 2014, p. 157)

From the perspective of feminist critique there is always something both risky and true in claiming that women are especially vulnerable. The claim can be taken to mean that women have an unchanging and defining vulnerability, and that kind of argument makes the case for paternalistic protection. And yet, there are good reasons to argue for the differential vulnerability of women; they suffer disproportionately from poverty and literacy, two very important dimensions of any global analysis of women's condition. Women disproportionately suffer also the impacts of disasters, severe weather events, and climate change because of cultural norms and the inequitable distribution of roles, resources, and power, especially in developing countries.

In some ways, vulnerability has been regarded as a value in feminist theory and politics. This means neither that women are more vulnerable than men nor that women value vulnerability more than men do. Rather, certain kinds of gender-defining attributes, like vulnerability and invulnerability, are distributed unequally, and for purposes of shoring up certain regimes of power that subordinates women.

Religion (Christianity) has been one of the patriarchal structures that have objectified women and denigrated their bodies. At this point we should briefly mention the strong negative impact of prejudice of perceiving women's body as the seed of carnal wickedness and seductive wilderness, imprinted negative stereotype by church fathers and perpetuated throughout church history. (Furlan, 2006, p. 117)

And that brings us to the problem of vulnerability and its myths and common misconceptions about weakness of women on one hand, and the danger of their sexuality, on the other. The prejudice of the virgin-whore dichotomy setup within cultures that historically have excluded female bodies from the properly social and political realm is well known. Women have been figured as either innocent virgins or dirty whores.

Among other negative consequences that negative gender stereotypes regarding women's bodies have had on the perception of women as embodied subjects, the vulnerability of women's bodies and their abuse is fare more destructive.

Although the paper will not focus on the question of vulnerability of women's bodies furtheron, it would be appropriate to stress out three aspects of women's vulnerability in terms of embodied experience: (1.) on women's disproportional suffering from poverty and literacy, (2.) on femicide (the phenomenon of the female homicides in Ciudad Juárez, called in Spanish feminicidio (femicide) involves the violent deaths of hundreds of women and girls since 1993 in the

northern Mexican region of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua<sup>2</sup>) and (3.) on women's involvement in abuse (be it sexual abuse in terms of rape) or in terms of Kelly Oliver's *Women's as weapons of war*. Within popular discourse, women's bodies, menstrual blood, and female sexuality can be used as tactics of war because of the potency of their association with danger of nature. Oliver states that *akin to a natural toxin or intoxicant, women's sex makes a powerful weapon because, within our cultural imaginary, it is by nature dangerous.* (Oliver, 2007, p. 31)

And that brings us to the problem of the figures of women from wars in the Middle East, speaking of Palestinian women suicide bombers, starting with Wafa Idris in January 2002. An editorial published in Egypt's weekly newspaper *Al-Sha'aba* few days after the bombing, stated: *It is a woman who teaches you today a lesson in heroism, who teaches you the meaning of jihad, and the way to die a martyr's death ... It is a woman who has shocked the enemy with her thin, meager and weak body. It is a woman who blew herself up, and with her exploded all the myths about woman's weakness, submissiveness, and enslavement.* (Whaley Eager, 2008, pp. 188-189)

While women are obviously capable of the most heinous abuse and torture, the myth or prejudice of women more savage than men continues today with stories of women torturers and women interrogators in Iraq (shocking images of Pfc. Lynndie England and Army Spc. Sabina Harman at the Abu Gharib prison in Iraq) as well as in Guantanamo Bay prisons. There women have been identified with sex and their sexuality has been figured as a weapon by the military. The prejudice of that so-called dangerous natural sexuality can be harnessed by the military to break and "soften up" recalcitrant prisoners. That suggests that the presence of women in Abu Gharib prison allowed for even more humiliating forms of abuse supposedly used to "soften up" prisoners before interrogation. Because of their sex and its seemingly natural effect on men, women become the means to compound not only sexual and physical abuse but also abuse of religious and cultural beliefs. The use of menstrual blood in

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<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon of the female homicides in Ciudad Juárez, called in Spanish feminicidio ("femicide") involves the violent deaths of hundreds of women and girls since 1993 in the northern Mexican region of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, a border city across the Rio Grande from the U.S. city of El Paso, Texas. The number of murdered women in Ciudad Juarez since 1993 is estimated to be more than 370. After surveying 155 killings out of 340 documented between 1993 and 2003, a government committee found that roughly half were prompted by motives like robbery and gang wars, while a little more than a third involved sexual assault. The murders of women and girls in Ciudad Juárez since 1993 have received international attention, primarily due to perceived government inaction in preventing violence against women and girls and bringing perpetrators to justice. More recently, prosecutors from the state of Chihuahua reported that in 2010, 270 women were killed within the state, of these murders 247 occurred in Juarez. In 2011, Chihuahua's Attorney General, Carlos Manuel Salas, announced during a briefing in August 2011 that 222 women had been killed in Chihuahua since January of that year. Of these 222 murders, 130 of them occurred in Ciudad Juarez. In total, more than 300 women were murdered in the city in 2011. It is believed that the femicide in Ciudad Juarez may be related to organized crime (like prostitution rings) given the presence of the powerful drug cartels in the region. Further, criminal gangs have become a permanent threat particularly to women on the border. Gang activity creates high risk for women especially due to very little institutional protection. This patriarchal backlash may indeed be the result of lack of employment opportunities for men and more women entering the workforce which has altered traditional gender dynamics and created a situation of conflict between the sexes. (Overall, in considering the potential motives for gendered violence against women, academic Mercedes Olivera has argued that femicide is a mechanism of domination, control, oppression, and power over women. (Olivera, 2006, 113).

the interrogation of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay is especially telling. Patriarchal cultures have traditionally regarded menstrual blood as unclean and disgusting. Now the imagined abject power of menstrual blood is being used as a weapon of war. It is not just that we suppose that our Muslim prisoners will think they are unclean being exposed to menstrual blood, but also that within our own culture and the rhetoric of the soldiers and media reporting these incidents, menstrual blood is seen as unclean. (Oliver, 2007, p. 20-22) Patriarchal culture demeans and denies the elemental power of the female body. So the taboo of impurity and inferiority of women's body, dangerous and impure in ritual is stigmatized and pathologized. Menstruation is regarded by many, as a sickness, a blank spot, a non-event that the women must endure and would be better without, an evil time. Menstrual taboos, are defined not by moral distinctions (negative-positive; pure-impure), but by the logic of separation inherent in both. The most common explanation for the taboo of menstruation is "primitive" association of menstrual blood with "demonic powers", which thus puts the menstrual prohibitions with a kind of superstition. (Furlan Štante, 2014, p. 40)

In these regard Kelly Oliver examines various ways in which women involved in war in Middle East have been imagined as dangerous weapons linked with death. Within popular discourse, women's bodies, menstrual blood, and female sexuality can be used as tactics of war because of the potency of their association with the danger of nature. To that extent the vulnerability of women's bodies could be understood as the one being violated and abused to violet others.

**Conclusion** Despite of increasing involvement of women in the military occupation, women are far from equal with men. They are visibly exposed to non-equal distribution of power, discrimination and negative impact of gender stereotypes and prejudices, and all this is also manifested in the form of disadvantage in promotion and sometimes also payment.

We could conclude that unequal opportunities of women in military profession are practical consequences due to misconceptions of the concept of women's vulnerability and negative impact of gender stereotypes and prejudices regarding women that have become strong platform of our collective memory. The issue of understanding women as both offensive and defensive weapons of war has arose, and that has everything to do with stereotypes of femininity and female sexuality.

With women entering military arena, women have started to tell their own stories, they have started with deconstruction of those negative gender stereotypes. In the framework of the women's liberation movement this could be understood as attempt to revive *her-story*, that has been, suppressed in the markedly masculine *his-story* of military service. Within *her story*, the face of military arena is slowly began to change, embracing also feminine side.

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