



Women Leadership in Japanese Politics and Gender Manifestation in Policies

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Abstract

This article analyzes the complex state of female political leadership in Japan, emphasizing the tension between democratic progress and persistent socio-political traditionalism. Sanae Takaichi's historic election as first female Prime Minister of Japan in October 2025 represents a major milestone in descriptive representation, but it has not yet produced substantive, policy-based gender equality. Tracing developments from early imperial leadership through the restrictive Meiji-era *ie* household system and post-1945 constitutional guarantees, the study examines the systemic barriers that continue to limit women's role in national decision-making. Key obstacles include male-dominated, hereditary political networks that control the "three bans": *jiban* constituency base, *kanban* name recognition, and *kaban* campaign funding. As a result, despite local gains in municipal politics, women remain underrepresented nationally, holding only 14.6 percent of House of Representatives seats as of February 2026. The paper ultimately shows that symbolic leadership breakthroughs can coexist with elite efforts to preserve conservative political structures rather than drive meaningful social change.

Keywords: Female political leadership, Japan politics, Sanae Takaichi, descriptive vs. substantive representation, institutional barriers, 'three bans' (*jiban*, *kanban*, *kaban*), Sixth Basic Plan on Gender Equality, Womenomics, Gender Gap, Conservative Social Norms.

1. Introduction

The landscape of female political leadership in Japan represents a profound intersection of modern democratic advancement and enduring socio-political traditionalism. While the nation recently celebrated the election of its first female Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, in October 2025, this achievement serves primarily as a significant advancement in descriptive representation increasing the visibility of women in executive roles rather than a complete shift toward substantive representation, where gender-equality objectives are consistently integrated into policy. Although the 1947 Constitution guarantees equality, entrenched conservative structures in family life, corporate institutions, and political parties continue to restrict women's access to decision making.

Women still face many barriers in Japanese politics. Problems such as campaign funding, party recruitment, and the allocation of cabinet posts continue to limit their participation, even though Japan has democratic institutions. Historically, women had power in earlier periods, such as the 8th century, when empresses ruled. However, during the Meiji period, laws such as the *ie* (household) system placed women in a lower social and legal position (Satoshi, 2022). After 1945, the new Constitution, influenced by Beate Sirota Gordon and General MacArthur, gave women voting rights and legal equality. Even so, representation of women soon declined, falling to only 3.4 percent in the Diet by 1974 (Takao, 2007).



International Journal of Law, Politics and Governance (IJLPG)

Volume 1 | Issue 2 | 2026 | Article ID: 9065-0834-0258 | <https://doi.org/10.64823/ijlpg.2602002>

IORO Publications · Texas, USA · www.ioro.org

Today, many institutional barriers still limit participation of women in Japanese politics. The most important are the 'three bans': *jiban* (a strong constituency base), *kanban* (public name recognition), and *kaban* (campaign funding) (Furnival, May 2026). These resources are mostly controlled by male-dominated political networks and are often passed down through political families, making it difficult for women to become strong candidates. While local politics has seen some progress, with women's representation in some Tokyo councils reaching up to 50 percent, national representation remains low. As of February 2026, women held only 14.6 percent of seats in the House of Representatives (Inoue, February 2026). This shows that, despite individual milestones such as Takaichi's prime ministership, Japanese political elite still tends to preserve traditional structures rather than promote deeper social change.

1.1. Review of Literature

1.2. Electoral Stereotypes and Candidate Evaluations

Works by **Ono and Yamada (2018)** on Do voters prefer gender stereotypic candidates? Evidence from a conjoint survey experiment in Japan published in *Political Science Research and Methods*, 8(3), 477–492, examine how voter stereotypes shape the electoral viability of women seeking political office. Using a conjoint survey experiment in Japan, they distinguish between general bias against female candidates and gendered expectations about policy competence. Their findings show no broad voter bias against women as candidates. Instead, women face substantial penalties when they claim expertise outside conventionally 'feminine' areas such as welfare, social security, and consumer affairs and enter fields coded as masculine, including foreign affairs, national defence, and macroeconomic policy. The study therefore identifies a double bind: conforming to gendered expectations narrows women's routes to senior cabinet posts, while challenging those expectations risks alienating voters.

1.3. Party Alternation and Policy Translation

In the article on The DPJ and women: The limited impact of the 2009 alternation of power on policy and governance, published in the *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 12(3), 441–466, **Gaunder (2012)** enquires whether changes in governing coalitions produce substantive policy gains for women. The study focuses on the Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) historic 2009 victory, which ended the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) long rule and brought a record number of women into the Diet. Gaunder finds that these gains in descriptive representation had limited policy impact. Political instability, internal factionalism, and party leaders' emphasis on electoral survival pushed women legislators' priorities to the margins. Gender-equity proposals including revision of the Civil Code to allow married couples to retain separate surnames (*sentakuteki fūfu bessei*) stalled despite sustained advocacy by women in the Diet. The analysis shows that descriptive representation does not automatically become substantive representation when party gatekeepers subordinate gender policy to coalition maintenance.

1.4. Institutional Inertia and the Non-Adoption of Quotas

An article on Quota nonadoption in Japan: The role of the women's movement and the opposition, published in *Politics & Gender*, 11(1), 176–186, **Gaunder (2015)** explains why Japan has not adopted binding gender quotas, contrasting its experience with that of other East Asian democracies. The study identifies two common drivers of quota adoption: pressure from a cohesive feminist movement and diffusion through left-wing opposition parties. Neither developed sufficiently in Japan. The movement by women remained divided along ideological and demographic lines for example, between career professionals and housewives' associations limiting its ability to exert unified pressure. At the same time, the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and, later, the DPJ did not establish binding internal candidate quotas. With little competitive pressure from the

left, the conservative LDP had no strong incentive to adopt affirmative mechanisms, and female recruitment remained ad hoc and symbolic rather than systemic.

1.5. Societal Attitudes and State Intervention

Miura et al. (2022) in the article Explaining public support for gender quotas: Sexism, representational quality, and state intervention in Japan published in *Politics & Gender*, 19(3), 781–805, investigate public support for electoral gender quotas to identify the societal barriers to institutional reform. Using national survey data, they distinguish among hostile, benevolent, and ‘modern’ sexism. Their results indicate that opposition to quotas is driven mainly by modern sexism: the belief that institutional barriers have disappeared and that women simply lack interest in political careers. The authors also identify a “principle-policy puzzle.” Even voters who favour gender-balanced government may oppose statutory quotas because they distrust state intervention or question candidates’ qualifications. The study helps explain why top-down reform remains politically constrained: conservative discourse presents affirmative intervention as incompatible with meritocratic norms.

1.6. Legislative Behavior and Substantive Policy Outcomes

In the chapter on Substantive Representation of Women in Asian Parliaments (pp. 27–49) in edited book titled Substantive representation of women in Japan by **Eto (2022)**, examines how women legislators use bicameral Diet of Japan to advance substantive representation. Drawing on committee activity, parliamentary questions, and bill sponsorship, Eto finds that women who are concentrated mainly in the House of Councillors (Upper House) often act as policy entrepreneurs on neglected social issues. These include expanded childcare, elder care, domestic-violence prevention, and working conditions for non-regular employees. Their influence, however, is limited by women’s smaller presence in the more powerful House of Representatives (Lower House) and by the patriarchal hierarchy of policy deliberation councils (*shingikai*). Eto concludes that women politicians consistently raise gendered concerns in parliamentary questions and debate, merely converting those priorities into legislation requires cross-party caucusing and strategic alliances with male political elites.

1.7. Historical Perspective

The history of female leadership in Japan did not follow a simple path of steady progress. Instead, it moved through periods of power, restriction, and partial regaining. In the 8th century, several empresses ruled Japan, showing that women could hold high political authority in early Japanese history. Later, during the Heian period, elite women could manage estates, inherit property, receive education, and exercise social and economic influence. These examples show that leadership of women was not foreign to Japanese tradition; rather, it was gradually limited by later political and social adjustments.

This earlier space for women’s authority declined sharply from the late Edo period onward. Kaibara Ekken’s 17th-century text *Onna Daigaku* (Learning for Women) promoted Confucian ideas that stressed women’s obedience to fathers, husbands, and sons (Cranmer-Byng, 1905). These ideas later gained legal force during the Meiji period through the Meiji Civil Code of 1898. The Code established the *ie* (household) system, which placed legal power in the hands of the male household head and reduced independent legal status of women (Takahashi, 2025). At the same time, the ideal of the ‘Good Wife, Wise Mother’ (*Ryosai Kenbo*) encouraged women to serve the nation mainly through domestic duties, childrearing, and support for the family (Koyama, 2015). Thus, public influence of women was gradually redirected into the private household, creating social norms that continued to shape Japanese politics in later periods.

1.8. The Post-War Transformation

The modern legal framework for gender equality in Japan was largely a product of the Allied occupation following World War II. In December 1945, under the direction of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), General Douglas MacArthur, the Japanese Diet revised the election law to grant women the right to vote and run for political office. This was not merely an American imposition; it built upon decades of advocacy by Japanese suffragists like Fusae Ichikawa, who had been lobbying for voting rights since the 1920s. During this earlier period, feminists founded the Suffrage League for Women in 1924, successfully overturning prohibitions on attending political meetings even as voting rights remained elusive until the post-war reforms (Molony, 2021).

The 1947 Japanese Constitution became a global milestone for rights of women, largely due to the contributions of Beate Sirota Gordon, a 22-year-old member of MacArthur's staff who drafted key sections on equal rights. Its provisions were unusually expansive for the period: Article 14 prohibited discrimination based on race, creed, sex, or social status; Article 24 established equality in marriage, divorce, and property inheritance; and Articles 26 and 27 guaranteed equal opportunities in education and the right to work (Matsui, 2011).

The immediate impact of these reforms was significant; in the April 1946 elections, 39 women were elected to the House of Representatives. However, this initial breakthrough was followed by stagnation as traditional power structures reasserted themselves during the early 1950s. By 1974, female representation in the Diet had declined to just 3.4 percent, highlighting the tension between formal legal equality and entrenched sociopolitical conservatism.

1.8.1. Comparative Representation Data by Chamber (2024–2026)

Across legislatures in Japan, representation of women varies sharply by chamber and level of government. In the House of Representatives, women held 73 of 465 seats (15.7%) in October 2024, 72 of 465 (15.5%) in December 2025, and 68 of 465 (14.6%) by February 2026 (The Mainichi, Feb 2026). In the House of Councillors, women held 64 of 248 seats (25.8%) after the July 2022 election and rose to 73 of 248 (29.4%) after July 2025. At the local level as of May 2022, women occupied 386 of 2,644 seats (14.6%) in prefectural assemblies and 5,133 of 29,135 seats (17.6%) in municipal assemblies (Allen, 2023).

The data indicates a significant discrepancy between the lower and upper houses. The House of Councillors has moved closer to the 30 percent, largely due to its electoral system which includes a substantial proportional representation (PR) tier. Conversely, the House of Representatives, where the single-member district (SMD) system dominates, remains a much harder environment for women, as SMDs tend to favor incumbents and those with established *jiban* (constituency base), *kanban* (name recognition), and *kaban* (funding). These resources are largely controlled by male-dominated networks, creating a cycle of exclusion (Eto, 2020). While individual breakthroughs like the election of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in October 2025 signal descriptive progress, the structural barriers of the 'three bans' continue to hinder broad-based female political empowerment.

Local politics has also become a more favorable arena for women, as illustrated by the 'Tokyo Paradox,' in which some city councils have achieved female representation of up to 50 percent. Yet rural assemblies remain markedly underrepresented: by the end of 2024, more than one-third had only one-woman member or none (Yamaguchi, 2024). This contrast shows that, although national and urban trends indicate progress, entrenched gender norms and systemic barriers continue to limit full participation of women in Japanese political decision making.

1.9. 'Womenomics' Experiment

Japan integrated 'Womenomics' into its national growth strategy in 2013 under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Based on the theory of Kathy Matsui (the vice chair and chief Japan strategist for Goldman Sachs in 1999) that closing gender employment gaps could increase GDP by 13 to 15 percent, the policy shifted gender discourse from human rights toward economic utility. Government reports credited the initiative with adding 3.3 million women to the workforce between 2012 and 2019, pushing female participation to 74 percent, a rate higher than that of the United States (Japan Focus, 2023). Despite these impressive statistics, the quality of this employment remains a critical issue.

The expansion primarily occurred through 'non-regular' roles, which lack job security, benefits, and adequate pay. By 2019, 56 percent of female employees held these precarious positions, compared to only 22.8 percent of men. The vulnerability of this workforce became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic; women accounted for 710,000 of the 970,000 layoffs in April 2020. Ultimately, while Womenomics grew the quantity of female workers, it failed to dismantle the structural barriers preventing them from reaching regular employment and senior leadership (Kotera and Schmittmann, 2022).

1.10. A Paradigm Shift in Descriptive Representation

Sanae Takaichi's election as the first female Prime Minister of Japan in October 2025 marked a breakthrough in expressive representation. For the first time, Japan was led by a woman who rose through the traditional and dynastic power structure of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). After three bids for the LDP presidency, her authority was strengthened by the party's historic and best majority in the February 2026 lower house election, where it won 316 of 465 and managed a majority of 354 seats along with its coalition partner Japan Innovation Party (JIP). This mandate enabled her to prioritize economic security and critical mineral supply-chain resilience during her diplomatic debut at the G7 summit in June 2026 (The Mainichi, 2026).

The 2025–2026 cabinet marked significant symbolic milestones for Japan, most notably with Takaichi herself serving as the first female Prime Minister in Japan. Another groundbreaking selection was Katayama Satsuki, who became the first woman to lead the powerful Ministry of Finance. This appointment is particularly meaningful because it places a woman at the helm of a highly influential 'hard' ministry, directly challenging the conventional assumption that female politicians should be restricted to 'soft' portfolios like gender equality or social welfare. In contrast, sectors such as foreign affairs remain male-dominated portfolios where women are still seldom appointed (The Japan News, 2025). Still, women's broader representation remains weak, at 14.6 percent in the lower house, Japan continues to lag other G7 countries that use legislated or voluntary quotas.

Takaichi's ideological orientation further exemplifies the 'retraditionalization' of political elite in Japan. Her commitment to maintaining male-only imperial succession stands in tension with public opinion: 86 percent of Japanese respondents regard the prospect of a female Prime Minister as desirable, while substantial support also exists for permitting a woman to ascend the imperial throne. Her premiership therefore demonstrates that a woman may attain the highest political office within Japan's existing institutional order; nevertheless, her emphasis on defence, traditional values, and fiscal stimulus is more likely to consolidate institutional continuity than to generate far-reaching social transformation.

Policy Manifestation under the Sixth Basic Plan for Gender Equality

The Takaichi administration's gender-policy agenda is most clearly reflected in the Sixth Basic Plan for Gender Equality, approved in March 2026. The plan adopts a pragmatic approach; it seeks to address persistent gender gaps and Japanese demographic pressures while avoiding a direct break with conservative social

values. In this sense, it represents an attempt to accommodate women more effectively within existing institutions rather than to radically restructure those institutions (Japan Times, 2026).

A major focus of the Sixth Basic Plan is the issue of married women's surname use. Japan remains the only country in the world that legally requires married couples to share the same surname, and this requirement disproportionately affects women, who change their names in about 95 percent of marriages (Japan Times, 2026). Although Takaichi opposes a selective dual-surname system, arguing that it could undermine the social structure, her government has supported a narrower reform, giving legal validity to the standalone use of maiden names on official documents such as passports and driver's licenses. This compromise illustrates the administration's broader pattern of incremental reform within conservative boundaries (Japanist, 2026).

Moreover, a comparison of Japanese Fifth and Sixth Basic Plans for Gender Equality reveals both policy continuity and a gradual strengthening of specific targets. Regarding leadership of women, the Fifth Plan aimed to reach 30% representation 'as early as possible,' while the Sixth Plan reaffirms the 30% target for 2030 and presents gender parity as an objective for the 2030s (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2026). In relation to male childcare leave, the Fifth Plan set a 30% participation benchmark, whereas the Sixth Plan places greater emphasis on cultivating awareness of 'co-parenting' (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2026).

Gender pay-gap disclosure has also been broadened, expanding from firms with more than 300 employees under the Fifth Plan to those with more than 100 employees under the Sixth Plan (Fisher Phillips, n.d.). Similarly, while the Fifth Plan encouraged the workplace use of maiden names, the Sixth Plan moves further by supporting legal recognition of their standalone use (Japan Times, 2026). The Sixth Plan also strengthens accountability for women's advancement by mandating disclosure of the proportion of women in managerial positions (Phillips, 2026). Additionally, the April 2026 expansion of gender pay-data reporting represents another important policy development. Under the new requirements, companies with more than 100 employees must disclose both their gender pay gap and the share of women in management. This measure is intended to improve transparency for ESG investors, job seekers, and the wider labour market (Phillips, 2026).

1.11. Regional Disparity

Although national politics remains largely male-dominated, local politics has emerged as a comparatively more accessible arena for women's participation. This contrast is often described through the 'Tokyo Paradox,' where representation of women in some city councils, including Suginami, has risen to around 50 percent (Munk School of Global Affairs, 2026). The paradox lies in the fact that while Japan continues to lag at the national level, certain urban local bodies have shown that higher levels of women's representation are possible when entry barriers are lower and community-based politics becomes more important than party hierarchy.

Several factors help explain this local progress. Local office often involves lower campaign costs, smaller constituencies, and less dependence on long-established political networks, making it more feasible for educated women and community activists to enter public life. At the same time, these positions may be less attractive to male elites whose ambitions are directed toward national political careers. Opposition parties also tend to recruit women candidates more actively, especially in urban areas where voters may be receptive to reform-oriented politics. Women candidates are often perceived as less connected to corruption and more attentive to everyday community concerns such as childcare, schooling, eldercare, and local welfare services (Sherry, 2011).

Rural assemblies, by contrast, remain deeply underrepresented and continue to reflect more traditional patterns of political recruitment. By the end of 2024, more than one-third of Japan's local assemblies had either one-woman member or none (Japan Today, n.d.). In these areas, politics is still shaped by traditional networks, where patronage, personal connections, and socializing through outmoded drinking culture can make political participation difficult for women candidates. The rural gap therefore shows that local political advancement of women is not uniform across Japan; it depends heavily on local social norms, party recruitment practices, and the extent to which political networks are open to newcomers (Japan Today, 2026).

1.12. Institutional Mechanism

The design of Japanese electoral system plays a decisive role for women in shaping chances of being nominated and elected. Research suggests that majoritarian systems, especially single-member districts (SMDs), tend to restrict diversity because parties often prefer candidates who are already well known, well financed, and embedded in local political networks. By contrast, systems that allow voters to cast multiple votes could create more openings for women and other underrepresented candidates. This was visible in brief 1946 experiment with the Block Vote (BV) system in Japan, when voters could support more than one candidate and women achieved an unusually high level of electoral success for the period (Yoshikuni, Hirofumi and Yuko, 2025). Rather than merely converting public preferences into parliamentary seats, the evidence indicates that Japan's electoral rules play an active role in determining the types of candidate parties choose to nominate and those whom voters view as viable choices.

In Japanese current mixed electoral system, women candidates are generally more likely to gain seats through the Proportional Representation (PR) tier than through SMD contests (Takao, 2008). PR systems may provide parties greater flexibility to balance their candidate lists and include women without forcing them to compete directly against entrenched local incumbents. However, the dual-candidacy mechanism weakens this potential by allowing candidates who narrowly lose SMD races to enter the Diet through PR lists. As a result, PR seats may be used to rescue established district candidates rather than to advance women or other underrepresented groups. This blurs the corrective function of proportional representation and limits its ability to serve as a genuine pathway for gender-balanced representation (Sakamoto, 1999).

1.12.1. Global Gender Gap Index Performance

Japanese performance in the Global Gender Gap Index of World Economic Forum shows slight overall progress but continuing weakness in political representation. Economic participation rose from 56.8 percent in 2024 to 61.3 percent in 2025, placing Japan 112th in that category. Educational attainment remained high at 99 percent in both years, ranking 66th in 2025, while health and survival stayed at 97 percent, ranking 50th (Japan Times, 2025). By contrast, political empowerment fell from 11.8 percent in 2024 to 8.5 percent in 2025, leaving Japan at 113th or lower in that area. Overall, Japan's index score increased only marginally, from 66.3 percent to 66.6 percent, and the country ranked 118th globally in 2025 (Japan Times, 2025).

The fall in political empowerment score of Japan in late 2025, despite Takaichi's rise to the prime ministership, shows the limits of gains based on individual appointments. The smaller number of women in cabinet and the continued underrepresentation of women in the lower house had greater weight in the index than the symbolic significance of a female head of government. Compared with other G7 countries, Japan's lower-house representation remains especially weak. Canada and the United Kingdom each have roughly 30 percent women in national lower or single houses, relying mainly on voluntary party measures. Germany also stands near 30 percent through a combination of voluntary and legislated mechanisms, while France reaches 36.17 percent under legislated parity rules. Italy is likewise around 30 percent with legislated quotas and a

female head of government, while the United States stands at about 28 percent without quotas. Japan, despite having a female Prime Minister, ranks lowest in this comparison, with only 14.6 percent women in the lower house and no quota system (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2026).

1.13. Ideological Shifts: Imperial Succession and Retraditionalization

The manifestation of gender in Japanese policy is also intimately linked to the debate over the Imperial House Law. Currently, only males in the paternal line could ascend the throne, a tradition Takaichi has pledged to protect. However, the Japanese public appears more progressive than its political leadership. The October 2025 poll found that 86 percent of Japanese considered it 'desirable' to have a female Prime Minister, and prior polls have shown broad support for a female emperor (The Yomiuri Shimbun, 2025). Yet, among the successful candidates in the February 2026 election, support for allowing a female emperor dropped sharply to 47 percent, down from 63 percent in 2024.

This pattern points to a process of reverting to traditional practice within political elite of Japan, in which the symbolic presence of a woman at the highest level of government does not necessarily translate into progressive gender policy. Takaichi's conservative ideology may create a form of 'substitution effect', the public visibility of a female Prime Minister could be interpreted as evidence of gender advancement, thereby reducing political pressure for deeper institutional reforms. In this sense, descriptive representation may satisfy expectations of change without producing substantive transformation. As a result, contentious reforms such as permitting female line imperial succession or legalizing same-sex marriage may remain politically marginalized, even when public opinion appears more supportive of such changes than the positions adopted by many elected leaders.

2. Conclusion

The rise of Sanae Takaichi marks a historic advance in visibility of women within Japanese politics, yet it does not by itself signal a transformation of the gendered foundations of policymaking. Her prime ministership shows that a woman can attain the highest office within existing political order of Japan, however her agenda remains rooted in established conservative priorities. Her focus on fiscal stimulus, defense, constitutional issues, and traditional values therefore suggests continuity with the existing system rather than a shift toward broad social reform.

This distinction highlights the central challenge of Japan, converting symbolic representation into substantive gender equality. Achieving this requires addressing the structural barriers that limit women's entry and influence, including the 'three bans,' electoral rules that favor established candidates, and continued reliance on dynastic or celebrity routes into political office. Although the Sixth Basic Plan promotes transparency, maiden-name recognition, and workplace participation of women, these measures remain incremental. They may help women navigate the existing system more effectively, but they do not fundamentally transform the institutions that limit women's authority within parties, legislatures, and policymaking.

Such political barriers are closely connected to wider social and economic structures. Japanese tax and social security systems continue to reinforce gendered employment patterns, especially through the 'dependent spouse' deduction, which discourages many married women from taking full-time regular work. Firm-based household benefits further sustain this model, helping to preserve the gender pay gap and concentration of women in insecure or secondary employment. Similarly, repeated delays in 30 percent leadership target of Japan reveal the weakness of political commitment. A goal first set for the Sixth Basic Plan of 2020s was postponed to 2030.

Ultimately, the significance of Takaichi's leadership should be assessed not solely in terms of the symbolic importance of her premiership, but by the extent to which it facilitates durable pathways to political participation and influence for women across parties, institutions, and levels of government. If her rise remains an exceptional achievement within a male dominated system, it may reinforce the illusion of progress while leaving the foundations of inequality intact. The central task of Japan, therefore, is to move beyond representation as visibility and make it a force for structural change. Leadership of women would bring real change only when political power is linked with economic security, institutional reform, and firm social equality.

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