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Women, Peace and Security: Women's Participation for Peaceful Change



Sudanese protesters march during a demonstration to commemorate 40 days since the sit-in massacre in Khartoum, North, Sudan, on July 13, 2019.
Photo: Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah / Reuters / TT.

JOINT BRIEF SERIES: NEW INSIGHTS ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY (WPS) FOR THE NEXT DECADE

On 31 October 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Several other resolutions followed, which together constitute the normative framework for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This brief series was initiated in connection to the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 and promotes the realization of the WPS agenda through evidence-based policy and practice. It is the result of a collaboration between the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), and UN Women.

The editorial board has consisted of Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Sophia Wrede from FBA, Louise Olsson from PRIO, and Katarina Salmela and Pablo Castillo Diaz from UN Women. The views and opinions expressed in the brief series are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the collaborating partners.

■ INTRODUCTION

In the two decades since UNSCR 1325, nonviolent uprisings have replaced violent conflict as the leading form of mass political contention.¹ However, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has been particularly attentive to the impact of war on women. Yet, as more countries experience popular protest and mass uprisings, and more resistance campaigns turn to nonviolent tactics, WPS issues become increasingly relevant in the vast landscape between violence and voting. The pillars of the agenda – participation, protection, prevention of gendered violence, and providing gender-sensitive relief and recovery – are important issues and factors in nonviolent mass movements, where women's participation or exclusion can shape immediate and longer-term outcomes.

Beyond armed conflict and formal politics, women exercise various forms of collective action in civil society, from protests to strikes and other forms of civil resistance. For example, in Sudan's democracy movement, women played a pivotal role in sustaining nonviolent protests, not only at the frontlines of marches, sit-ins, and rallies but by providing food and other forms of support. In 2020, women led protests demanding key changes relevant to the WPS agenda – protection of women and girls and the prevention

of gender-based violence and other crimes – in numerous places across the world, from Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh and communities across Myanmar, to Bukavu in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. As political patterns change and more countries are affected by massive nonviolent movements – including those calling for democracy, human rights, and peace – our research has turned to look at women's participation in conflict in a broader perspective. As with armed movements, nonviolent mass uprisings are also characterized by diverse patterns of gendered inclusion or exclusion, with significant implications for movement outcomes and countries' prospects for peace and democracy.

This research brief examines how women's participation at the frontlines of mass mobilization affects movements' chances of success in the short and medium-term. It investigates whether women's inclusion leads to better outcomes, not only for the campaign but also for women in society more broadly. We argue that not only does women's participation at the frontlines of armed and nonviolent movements alike increase the chances of campaign success; it also often helps achieve and consolidate gender equality in the years that follow. Moreover, extensive frontline participation by women can serve as a 'rising tide for all boats', leading to significantly more-egalitarian distribution of rights and freedoms, resources and access to power across all social groups at least five years after the movement ends. However, these effects are highly conditional on whether the campaign itself succeeds – suggesting that while women's frontline participation is often crucial for campaign success, campaign success is likewise critical in ushering in new opportunities for women to expand and consolidate their rights and political power. State and non-state actors alike should include women at all levels – frontline, support, and leadership roles – to maximize their member base and strengthen substantive equality.

Previous research has focused on women's mobilization for 'gender-specific' goals, such as women's rights and reproductive justice, and for broader campaigns such as peace movements. We go beyond this narrow approach to women's politics and look at women's participation in national political movements, comparing violent and nonviolent campaigns' chances for success and their outcomes according to women's levels of participation.² We draw on a new dataset called Women in Resistance (WiRe) that systematically documents women's

participation at the frontlines, in support roles, and in leadership positions across 338 nonviolent and violent uprisings from 1945 to 2014.³ These campaigns had anti-government goals or territorial goals and involved at least 1,000 participants. We, therefore, excluded campaigns seeking more moderate goals and smaller, fringe movements from our analysis. This brief summarizes some of the key findings of that research.

WOMEN IN VIOLENT AND NONVIOLENT UPRISINGS

In the sections that follow, we build on the WPS agenda by examining women's participation across nonviolent and violent uprisings, analysing their mobilization dynamics and outcomes side by side. This is different than analysing women as peacemakers and peacebuilders, or as violent actors, per se – subjects that we and others in the WPS community have taken up and continue to examine elsewhere. Instead, we focus on variation in the proportion of women participants in all campaigns globally.

Since 1945, none of the violent campaigns in the dataset has had extensive levels of female participants. Yet in the most recent data (2010–2014), fully 70 per cent of nonviolent campaigns had moderate or extensive levels of women at the frontlines (Figure 1). As Figure 1 shows, violent campaigns are becoming increasingly gender-exclusive, whereas nonviolent campaigns have become increasingly gender-equitable in terms of frontline participation rates.

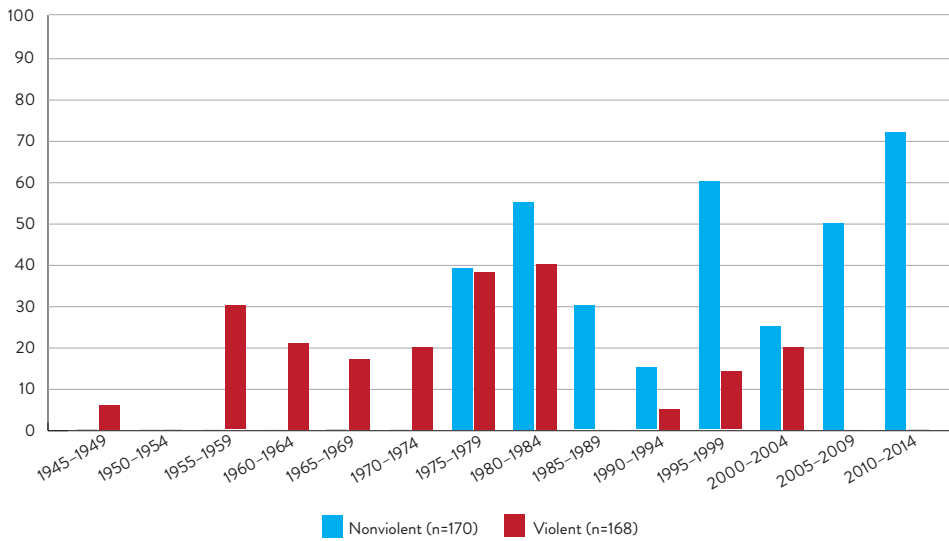
Next, we turn to the implications of these trends on the outcomes of mass uprisings.

Women's Participation and Movement Success

Women's participation in violent and nonviolent campaigns makes campaigns more likely to succeed for three key reasons. All things otherwise being equal, women's greater presence in resistance campaigns can make them more effective by adding numbers, legitimacy, and tactical innovation to mass uprisings.⁴

First and most importantly, women's active participation in resistance provides a greater possibility of mass mobilization by expanding the basis for mobilization by 50 per cent. Campaigns in which men are the primary combatants or dissidents short-

Figure 1. Percentage of Uprisings with Moderate or Extensive Women's Frontline Participation, 1945–2014

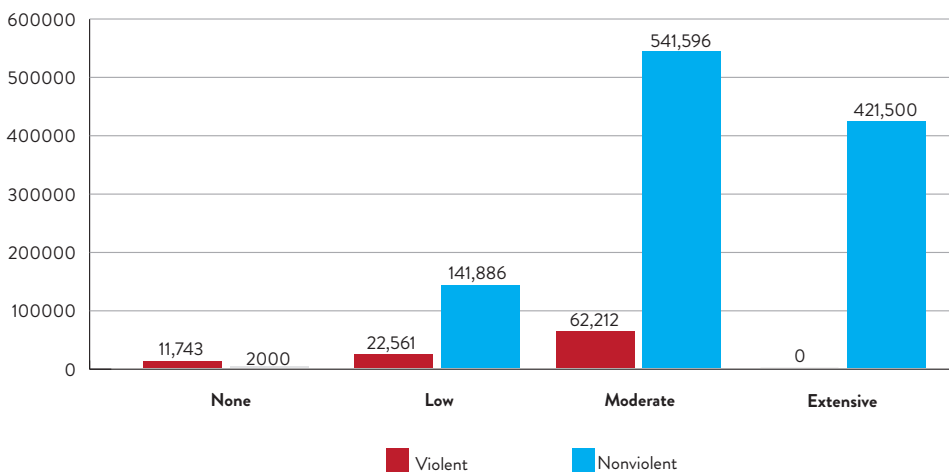


change their mobilizable base. In turn, they are likely to suffer lower numbers, thereby reducing their disruptive potential. Large-scale participation is critical for the success of mass uprisings, and campaigns that prohibit, discourage or fail to attract participation from half of the population on the basis of gender are severely limited on that front.

In the post-WWII period, nonviolent campaigns have been significantly larger and have had higher rates of women's frontline participation than have violent campaigns. Across both categories of uprisings, campaigns with high levels of women's frontline participation also tend to have higher peak participation sizes (Figure 2).

Figure 2 shows that gender-inclusive movements are significantly larger than gender-exclusive movements. However, we do not know whether they became large because they included women, or if women joined because they were already large-scale movements. One could imagine that larger campaigns attract higher proportions of women on the frontlines because of the perceived safety in numbers they offer. Conversely, campaigns that include women as well as men are more likely to achieve larger numbers; both dynamics could be at play. But some previous research has shown that women have often prioritized nonviolent strategies and tactics in their political mobilization. Other authors have made the case that nonviolence is an 'inclusive strategy' and that its presence drives higher rates of women's participation.⁵

Figure 2. Average Peak Participation by Women's Participation Levels, Violent and Nonviolent (1945–2014)



Second, as participants, women may increase campaigns' perceived legitimacy and catalyse mobilization across broader swathes of society.⁶ In various contexts, women have drawn on their societal roles as mothers and grandmothers to appeal to or reprimand political opponents in ways that are unavailable to men, who are more traditionally conceived of as politicized actors. For example, in the 2019 uprising in Algeria, journalists interviewed numerous grandmothers on the frontlines of street protests, who said they were protesting for their grandchildren. Grandmothers were also seen shaming riot police for supporting the regime. In both of these examples, grandmothers had moral authority that was unavailable to young people, men and other prototypical political actors, making the grandmothers' overtures uniquely effective. Existing research on rebel groups shows that when campaigns prominently feature women, they are more likely to invoke the universality of their cause. Movements deploy gendered narratives of 'country' and 'motherland' that call for multigenerational participation, in some cases, or use women's frontline presence to shame and cajole men into participation. During the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, for example, a 25-year-old woman named Asmaa Mahfouz famously took to YouTube to call on Egyptian men to show up for their sisters, daughters and mothers, shaming those who stayed home as cowards.

Third, organizational diversity is linked to creativity, and women's frontline participation may therefore increase movements' capacity for tactical innovation. Gender roles may endow women participants with the potential to wield transgressive and politically meaningful methods that are less readily available to all-male groups. For instance, in the midst of tense confrontations between protestors and security forces, women have innovated defensive tactics – such as accompanying students, creating human shields, stripping naked to embarrass observers and more – which provide protection without the need for armed defensive action or escalation. During the 2019 Sudanese Revolution, women tea sellers in Khartoum provided food and tea to participants during the weeks-long sit-in outside the military headquarters, which proved to be a decisive logistical achievement in creating staying power for the movement. Among violent movements, women have often been better than men at evading detection, making them particularly effective in espionage roles.

These strategic and tactical benefits of gender inclusivity apply to both violent and nonviolent campaigns. To understand

how movement success is impacted by women's participation and not just movement size, we examine the interaction between peak participation and the scale of women's frontline participation (none, low, moderate or extensive participation). We expect that as campaigns grow, those with higher rates of women's participation in frontline roles will have better chances of success, all things being equal.⁷

We consider success to be the short-term achievement of a campaign's overarching objective, such as independence or removal of the head of state from power. Across all campaigns, those that feature higher proportions of female frontline participants have a substantially higher likelihood of success. Not only do women on the frontlines increase the likelihood of campaign success, but when men significantly outnumber women on the frontlines, increased campaign size does not correspond with increased chances of success. Campaign success trends vary between violent and nonviolent uprisings. Our data-driven analysis suggests that nonviolent campaigns with 250,000 or more participants and at least 50 per cent female participation at the frontlines succeeded nearly every time. This does not hold for violent movements, which have a lower chance of winning due to systematically lower rates of female participation overall.

AFTER THE UPRISING

Having identified that women's participation makes both violent and nonviolent movements more likely to succeed in the short term, we next investigated whether inclusive rebellions led to democracy or gender equality in the medium term. To examine this, we focused on the observed change in egalitarian democracy and in women's rights, representation, and power five years after a movement ends, comparing these measures to the same ones the year before the movement began.

Does women's participation lead to democratic transformation?

Previous research has examined how gender roles can change as a result of armed conflict, not only due to women and girls engaging in violence but also as a result of their increasingly taking up previously masculine labour, managing households and bureaucratic tasks, and other traditionally male social roles. Yet these new gender roles do not necessarily lead to

gender equality or women's rights, either during war or in its aftermath, at which point women are sometimes expected to go 'back to the kitchen'. Moreover, armed conflict can affect gender equality trends in ways that do not represent improved equitable outcomes: female-headed households, women becoming the sole or primary breadwinners in their families, and women gaining mobility and decision-making power are often the result of devastating tragedy and personal loss, such as being widowed, displaced, or losing loved ones to violence and repression. These dynamics should not be confused with gains in women's empowerment.

There is little comparable research on nonviolent mobilization. However, extended mass political action – even nonviolent – is likely to echo some of these transformations documented in wartime. At the national level, uprisings and rebellions have ushered in some positive changes for women. For example, across the African continent since 1990, women's inclusion in formal politics through legislative representation has increased dramatically, a change driven by countries that experienced armed conflict.⁸ Moreover, new cross-national research finds that women's rights, representation, power, and improved gender equality seem to have some staying power after war, with women having more access to the workforce and the ballot, as well as more political influence, for at least a generation.⁹ Still, at the individual and national levels there is abundant case-based and historical evidence that women's gains are both subtly and violently contested by stakeholders in male-dominated political markets.¹⁰

Egalitarian democracy protects rights and freedoms for individuals across all social groups, and this is the system of democracy which arguably has the most promise for women's equality. There is strong evidence that women's participation – across any type of campaign – results in positive gains in egalitarian democracy in the aftermath of mass mobilization. However, this applies only when such campaigns succeed. It is specifically nonviolent campaigns that dramatically increase egalitarian democracy in countries where such campaigns have taken place. Extensive women's participation nearly doubles the predicted scores of egalitarian democracy five years after the campaign ends compared to campaigns with no women participants. Even low and moderate levels of women's frontline engagement predict sizable gains in egalitarian democracy. The results are more modest for violent campaigns. This positive story is accompanied by a more ominous one.

Greater rates of women's participation led to a greater risk of backlash and repression if the campaign failed. When large numbers of women participated in nonviolent campaigns, but those campaigns failed, countries experienced a precipitous drop in egalitarian democracy five years after the uprising. This may indicate a global tendency toward authoritarian backlash after campaigns that call for equal access to rights and resources. But there seems to be particularly acute retaliation against women for challenging a male-dominated system through mass participation.

Counterintuitively, after violent campaigns, we see modest positive gains in egalitarian democracy, regardless of the campaign outcome. To the extent that the WPS agenda has played a role, this finding may indicate that gender-inclusive peace and recovery efforts following armed conflict have often acted as a brake on authoritarian retrenchment and repression. Crucially, international actors, neighbouring countries, and other stakeholders help put countries exiting war back together. But such support is often not forthcoming following mass nonviolent uprisings. For the purposes of expanding human rights, egalitarian democracy, and political stability, the UN, regional players, and other international actors may need to provide similar gender-informed post-conflict support after nonviolent uprisings – especially those that have failed.

Does women's participation lead to women's empowerment?

Alongside potential gains in democracy, our research also shows that higher levels of women's frontline participation led to moderate increases in gender empowerment five years after a campaign ends. As before, nonviolent campaigns with extensive female involvement are most dynamic in improving women's empowerment five years after the campaign ends. But, again, these gains are conditional on the movement's success. There is a substantial predicted backslide in women's empowerment when nonviolent campaigns with extensive women's participation fail. Surprisingly, violent campaigns are as likely as nonviolent campaigns to see gains in women's empowerment. Moreover, there is significantly less risk of women's disempowerment after violent campaigns, which may again indicate the supportive role of the international community and other stakeholders in recovery processes, helping to protect or at least stabilize women's rights.

Thus, while there is preliminary evidence that greater women's participation indeed leads to patriarchal repression and a gendered backsliding, these dynamics obtain only when mass uprisings fail. Conversely, history indicates consistent positive effects on women's empowerment following successful campaigns that enjoyed high rates of women's frontline participation.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

What are some of the implications of this research for the WPS agenda? One key lesson is that nonviolent mass movements are increasingly common and more frequent than violent resistance campaigns. Gender inclusion, and women's participation specifically, has a powerful impact on how such uprisings occur and their short- and long-term implications. SCR1325 played a pivotal role in bringing women to the table in peace talks after conflicts and reimagining protection, prevention and recovery. The vast majority of rebellions and mass movements have significant numbers of female frontline participants who can play a key role in increasing the likelihood of post-conflict democracy and equality. This research underscores the importance of work related to WPS, and it also calls for an expansion of the agenda to include other forms of mass mobilization and conflict short of war. We find solid evidence that women's participation is essential for movements to succeed and that women's participation plays a key role in the consolidation of egalitarian democracy. We also find that, for nonviolent movements, success is critical in securing longer-term gender equality. While much of the existing literature specifies that women's mobilization generates either empowerment or backlash, we find conditional support for both of these outcomes.

Transformations in gender equality do not arise simply from social upheaval. Rather, the nature of women's participation on the winning team – and the nature of post-conflict peacebuilding – shapes equality after conflict. This is true for both nonviolent and violent campaigns, although nonviolent campaigns tend to boast higher levels of both women's frontline participation and rates of success.

Going forward, the UN and other stakeholders have an opportunity to support and expand women's rights in the aftermath of mass uprisings, particularly after the kinds of

nonviolent campaigns that have been overlooked historically in WPS resolutions and by the Security Council. Our findings also call for greater attention to WPS issues in countries beyond the Security Council's agenda. Many of the countries in which mass political uprisings occur are not a direct part of the Security Council's focus precisely because they have not experienced armed conflict and humanitarian crises. Thus, a more thorough integration of gender advisors in UN Country Teams and an expansion of capacity at UN Women's offices should be a major priority for achieving participation, prevention, and protection.

We conclude with key takeaways for the UN, framed around the 7-Point Action Plan from the Secretary-General of Women's Participation in Peacebuilding:

1. Conflict resolution: Systematic inclusion of women at all levels of conflict resolution should be extended to nonviolent movements and mass popular uprisings, which often end with transition talks and settlement processes similar to those used to resolve wars and militarized conflicts.

2. Post-conflict planning: Recognizing that women participate in large numbers across all types of resistance movements, prioritize women's inclusion in nonviolent transitions similarly to the way that women's inclusion has been prioritized in peace talks and politics after civil wars. Identify ways to support women's participation in formal politics and civil society in the wake of failed nonviolent uprisings in particular, through human rights treaties, regional courts, and other initiatives and programming design to protect rights and mitigate against authoritarian backlash.

3. Post-conflict financing: The UN and donors should recognize the risk of authoritarian backsliding and patriarchal repression operating alongside rebuilding efforts, particularly when violent and nonviolent popular movements fail and incumbent regimes seek to consolidate power through illiberal and gender-inequitable manoeuvres.

4. Gender-responsive civilian capacity: Emphasize, in training for civil society and grassroots organizations, the strategic benefits of gender inclusivity for nonviolent movement success, as well as the potential risks of authoritarian backsliding and patriarchal repression in the aftermath of failed movements.

5. *Women's representation in post-conflict governance*: Recognize that women's exclusion from leadership roles is not a sign of women's absence from campaigns. Conflict-related discrimination should be redressed wherever possible in the post-conflict consolidation of power.

6. *Rule of law*: Ensure that laws promote women's rights and political expression, particularly after nonviolent uprisings, when the law is often used as a tool for patriarchal repression.

7. *Economic recovery*: We note that economic aspirations are not simply a function of demobilization and reconstruction but are often central to conflict itself. Many of the mass uprisings in our dataset – from Poland to Tunisia – began with 'bread and dignity' claims that escalated into mass mobilization after failed state response. Women often articulate their economic priorities through the uprisings themselves, which can provide a starting point for heeding economic grievances and building egalitarian democracy. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Erica Chenoweth. 2020. *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press. Forthcoming.
- 2 Zoe Marks and Erica Chenoweth. 2020. *Rebel XX: Women at the Frontlines of Revolution*. Forthcoming.
- 3 The dataset integrates and extends variables from several other datasets outlined below, including the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) data project and the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) data project. The WiRe dataset catalogues women's participation in 338 maximalist resistance campaigns (i.e., those campaigns that call for the toppling of an oppressive government or territorial independence). The dataset identifies both nonviolent and violent maximalist campaigns in every country in the world from 1945 to 2014, providing a systematic look at various dimensions of women's participation in both types of campaigns. Using the campaign as the unit of analysis helps smooth out uneven reporting of events over time and maximizes the likelihood of observing women's real inclusion in the campaign – something history has shown to be widely underreported. See Chenoweth 2019 for a description.
- 4 Anne-Marie Codur and Mary Elizabeth King. 2015. 'Women in Civil Resistance', in *Women, War and Violence: Typography, Resistance and Hope*. Ed. Mariam Kurtz and Lester Kurtz; Marie A. Principe. 2017. 'Women in Nonviolent Movements' United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 399.
- 5 Jonathan R. Beckwith. 2002. *Making Genes, Making Waves a Social Activist in Science*. Harvard University Press; Susanne Schaffenaar. 2017. 'How (Wo)men Rebel: Exploring the Effect of Gender Equality on Nonviolent and Armed Conflict Onset' *Journal of Peace Research*, 54(6): 762–776; Anne Costain. 2000. 'Women's Movements and Nonviolence' PS: *Political Science & Politics*. 33(2): 175–180.
- 6 Meredith Loken. 2018. *Women in War: Militancy, Legitimacy, and Rebel Success*. PhD dissertation, University of Washington.
- 7 Campaign success is a complex phenomenon, and women's participation may be shaped by factors internal to the campaign. Therefore, we controlled for whether women's issues were central to the campaign's claims, whether the campaign had a gender-inclusive ideology and whether women's organizations called for peaceful mobilization, all of which we expected would increase women's enthusiasm. The analysis also controlled for whether the ruling regime engaged in violence against the campaign, which we might expect to decrease women's participation.
- 8 Melanie M. Hughes and Aili Mari Tripp. 2015. 'Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985–2010' *Social Forces*, 93(4): 1513–1540.
- 9 Kaitlyn K. Webster, Chong Chen, and Kyle Beardsley. 2019. 'Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment' *International Organization* 73(2): 255–289.
- 10 Marie E. Berry and Milli Lake. 2020. 'When Quotas Come Up Short' Essay' Boston Review. 14 September 2020.

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The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. FBA has since 2005 supported research primarily through its international Research Working Groups. These are composed of well-merited scholars from universities and research institutes worldwide who conduct scientific research on issues related to FBA's areas of expertise.

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

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