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**SIXTY YEARS
FIGHTING
GLOBAL POVERTY**

Stitched Up

Women workers
in the Bangladeshi
garment sector



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The continuing exploitation of women workers in clothing factories across the world is a damning indictment of the global economic system. In Bangladesh, women workers account for 85% of the total workforce in the garment industry. While some have viewed this as a positive step towards female emancipation, the reality is that women are employed in a highly exploitative context. Women workers remain at the bottom of the supply chain, working long hours for poverty wages and denied basic maternity rights.

This report seeks to expose the continuing violation of women workers' rights in the Bangladeshi garment industry. The report presents the findings of a major series of interviews conducted over six months with almost 1,000 women workers from 41 garment factories. As such, it stands as an important survey of the reality facing women workers across the Bangladeshi garment industry today.

The findings of the report are of direct relevance to British clothes retailers and

their customers, as many high street retailers source their cheapest clothing from Bangladesh. In response to public anger at the continuing exploitation of workers in their supply chains, these companies claim that they have taken action to address the problems. Yet the 'corporate social responsibility' programmes of British retailers have failed to improve the situation facing women workers in the garment factories of Bangladesh.

In the final analysis, it is the women workers of Bangladesh who will themselves win their right to decent jobs and dignity. War on Want is proud to work in partnership with the National Garment Workers' Federation in Bangladesh, whose campaigning won a major victory in 2010 when the minimum wage for garment workers was raised for the first time in four years. We will continue to work in solidarity with the women workers of Bangladesh in their struggle for a future free from poverty and exploitation.



John Hilary
Executive Director, War on Want

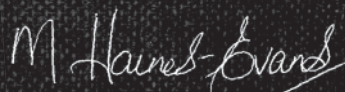
FAST FASHION AND THE WOMEN'S INSTITUTE

A common thread running throughout the history of the Women's Institute (WI) has been a strong sense of environmental and social justice, combined with a commitment to build an informed society, ready to take responsibility for its impact. The surge in demand for fast fashion has tremendous implications for both people and the planet. The WI is working hard to raise awareness of this impact and as consumers, WI members have been seeking assurances from their favourite brands about supply chain conditions.

A survey of 4,700 WI members found that 95% thought it was important that people making the clothes they bought were paid

a living wage in decent working conditions, and 85% were more likely to buy clothing from a particular company if they knew they had been made by people paid a living wage.

The National Federation of Women's Institutes commends the work of War on Want for raising awareness of the reality of working conditions for the women workers of Bangladesh, and is pleased to support this report.



Marylyn Haines-Evans
Public Affairs Chair, NFWI



Bangladesh's garment industry

02

Stitched Up Women workers in the Bangladeshi garment sector

Bangladesh's garment industry has been at the heart of the country's export boom ever since the first factory opened in 1976. The industry has grown dramatically over the past 35 years, and today accounts for 80% of Bangladesh's total exports. There are now 4,825 garment factories in Bangladesh employing over three million people. Fully 85% of these workers are women.

The expansion of the garment industry in Bangladesh was fuelled by the structural economic reforms of the 1980s, which opened up the Bangladeshi economy to foreign investment, deregulation of markets and privatisation. The Bangladeshi government established tax holidays and the development of export enclaves enabling businessmen to build or rent bonded warehouses in Dhaka and Chittagong cities. This process was accompanied by a massive increase of capital inflows into the country. Foreign direct investment leapt from a mere \$2.4 million in 1986 to more than \$1,000 million in 2008.¹ Today, one third of foreign direct investment comes from European companies, principally from the UK.

Young women are the driving force of the Bangladeshi garment sector. Of the 988 women workers interviewed for this report, 86% were between 18 and 32 years old. It is these young women who provide the hard labour needed to meet the unrealistic production targets set by Bangladeshi garment factories. Employers claim that older workers perform more poorly and make more mistakes, and that this is why they favour younger women workers.

As many as 83% of the women workers interviewed for this report are employed as sewing operators, and nearly 10% as 'helpers'. These are the lowest paid jobs in the industry. Women in both positions undertake manual work and their level of education is low: of the 988 interviewees, just 22% had obtained

their higher secondary certificate. Although men represent just 15% of the workforce in the garment industry, they perform the better paid jobs such as general managers, production managers, line managers and supervisors. This illustrates the gendered division of labour within the industry, with women only able to access lower paid jobs.

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights to women and men, and national laws are in place to safeguard women's rights. One example is the 2006 Bangladesh Labour Law, which protects the fundamental rights of women workers, including the right to maternity leave.² At the international level, Bangladesh has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), as well as ILO Convention 111 on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation.

The reality is that, despite such legislation, women workers' rights are ignored. Women workers perform poorly paid jobs, face severe labour rights violations and do not enjoy their legal entitlements. Statutory maternity rights are rarely provided, overtime is compulsory and excessively long working days add to the burden of domestic responsibilities, denying women any rest periods or time with their children.

The growth of Bangladesh's garment industry has been characterised by low wages, poor enforcement of labour legislation and the availability of a large pool of unskilled women workers. While some have viewed the 'feminisation' of the garment sector as a positive step towards women's emancipation, this has only happened in a highly exploitative context. This report seeks to expose the continuing violation of women workers' rights in the Bangladeshi garment industry, and to highlight the struggle of the many thousands of women who have defied oppression to fight for their rights.



NATIONAL GARMENT WORKERS' FEDERATION

The National Garment Workers' Federation (NGWF) was established in 1984 as an independent, democratic and progressive trade union federation. With a central office in Dhaka and regional branches across the country, it has campaigned since its inception for the protection and enforcement of women workers' rights. The NGWF has successfully organised over 1,000 factory committees in different garment factories, and has doubled its membership in just seven years. It played a leading role in the most recent campaign to increase the minimum wage for Bangladeshi garment workers, which resulted in an 80% wage rise for the lowest paid workers in 2010.

Women workers themselves are on the front line of the struggle for

their rights, but with long working days and domestic responsibilities they are often left with little time to participate in trade union activity. Labour rights training is key to challenging sweatshop exploitation, and the NGWF has prioritised this training for women workers over many years. The NGWF has also made a priority of promoting women leaders in its governance structures. Today, 17 of the 30 members of the NGWF central executive committee are women. Within the 37 factory-based unions that make up the NGWF, six female workers and four male workers are executive members, while at the branch and committee levels there are eight female and five male executive members.

Overworked and underpaid

As a result of sustained campaigning by women workers and other trade unionists in Bangladesh, the minimum wage for garment workers was raised in 2010 for the first time in four years. Receipt of wages in the garment industry depends on meeting an assigned production target. If production targets are met, a sewing operator's salary now starts at 3,861 taka (approximately £32) a month and a helper's wage at 3,000 taka (£25) a month.

Even with the new increases, however, these wages fall far short of the level which is considered to be a living wage – that is, enough to allow a worker to provide her family with basic human necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, water, health, education and transport.³ Trade unionists in Bangladesh calculate the living wage for a single worker to be at least 5,000 taka (£42) a month. According to the women workers interviewed for this research, the average monthly household expenditure for a family of four is higher still, and far in excess of the new minimum wage levels introduced in 2010:

Average monthly household expenditure (in taka):

House rent	1,825
Food	3,973
Transport	300
Education	950
Medical	715
Clothing	675
Refreshment	458
Total	8,896

According to Bangladeshi law, workers are supposed to work an eight-hour shift. However, garment workers are forced to put in extra hours on a daily basis in order to meet unrealistic production targets set by factory owners. The wages of 96% of the garment workers interviewed for this report are dependent on meeting production targets. Yet extra hours worked to meet production targets are not considered overtime, and are therefore unpaid.

Employers claim production targets are achievable in an eight-hour shift, but 64% of the women workers interviewed stated that targets are unrealistic within the legal working time, while 75% of workers interviewed themselves fail to meet their targets within the time allotted. One in three of those interviewed reported working an extra 11-20 hours per month in order to meet targets and thereby guarantee their basic salary, while 23% work 21-30 hours extra.

In addition to this unpaid overtime, the majority of women need to work further paid overtime in order to meet basic needs such as housing or rising food costs. Of the women workers interviewed for this report, 32% work a massive 100-140 hours of overtime every month, while 30% work 60-100 hours and 14% less than 40 hours. Fully 80% of women workers leave their factory between 8pm and 10pm each evening after starting work at 8am, infringing Bangladeshi labour law, which states that under no circumstances should daily working hours exceed 10 hours. Given that the majority of workers have a one hour return journey in the evening, most women arrive home late at night – at which point they have to begin their daily domestic chores.

To compound this injury, factory owners cut overtime pay whenever they can. Reasons

given for these deductions include lack of punctuality, failure to meet production targets, unnecessary conversation with co-workers, absence without leave, making mistakes at work or protesting management decisions. However, there is no provision in the Labour Law for fining workers for such reasons. Whatever the pretexts for the overtime deduction, the ultimate goal is to lower workers' wages.

Our research shows that 243 out of 988 workers experienced overtime deductions in the past month alone. Female workers are cheated more often than men, as they are seen as more docile and less ready to protest. Almost all the women interviewed for this report have experienced overtime deduction at some time in the past: 447 on the pretext that they had failed to meet production targets, 368 because of 'mistakes' during work and 314 for arriving to work late.

It should also be noted that only 37% of the workers interviewed for this report had received letters of appointment, while 68% had factory identity cards. These are legal requirements that serve as evidence of employment and form the legal framework enabling workers to claim their basic labour rights such as the right to receive a wage and payment for overtime.

Lastly, garment workers live on credit, and late payment of wages has a serious impact on their lives. The research conducted for this report showed that on average just 33% of workers receive their wages within a week of the month's end, which is the legal requirement for employers. A further 36% receive their wages in the second week after the end of the month, and 27% during the third. With 63% of workers not keeping any record of overtime, factory owners are able to cheat workers of their rightful earnings.

THE CASE OF YASMINA

Yasmina's mother died when she was young, and she was forced to leave school early in order to take care of her five brothers and sisters. Her father remarried, and Yasmina was herself married off against her will. Her husband used to beat her, and made her travel from their village to Dhaka to find work. She got a job in a garment factory, but was forced to leave her daughter uncared for in the village, where she later died.

Yasmina's husband subsequently abandoned her and married again, leaving her on her own in the capital. She works as a helper, the lowest grade in the garment industry, and earns the minimum wage – yet her former husband still demands money from her. Yasmina joined the National Garment Workers' Federation, and has now seen her monthly wage increase by 80% to 3,000 taka (£25) as a result of the campaign victory in 2010. According to Yasmina, this improvement in her prospects is down to the NGWF's persistent efforts, and has given her the strength to carry on.



Photo: War on Want

All day, and all of the night

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Stitched Up Women workers in the Bangladeshi garment sector

As noted above, almost all garment workers' wages are based on meeting production targets. These targets are in turn used as a powerful tool by managers to keep workers in factories beyond their legal working hours. Workers claim that rapid changes in high street fashion trends and the tight production deadlines imposed by Western retailers make production targets unrealistic, as workers are forced to learn new and complex designs in a very short space of time. By setting unrealistically high targets, factory management force workers to put in hours of unpaid overtime. Moreover, 90% of women workers reported that they were only notified about overtime a few hours before it was needed, and 82% stated that they could not refuse overtime for fear of losing their jobs.

Workers are put under particular pressure when the date for shipment of an order is close. To meet demanding shipment deadlines, workers are persuaded by management to work until midnight without a break. At least 75% of women workers interviewed for this report had carried out night shifts recently, and in the past month 48% of workers had

had to work night shifts on 1-3 days; 21% on 4-5 days, 12% on 6-10 days, and 18% for more than 10 days. Of these, only one in 10 had agreed to the night shift. In 82% of cases, workers were requested to work a night shift on the evening of the same day, giving them little notice to organise child care or make other personal arrangements.

While night shifts are legal under Bangladeshi labour law, research shows that in reality night shifts are simply considered to be another form of overtime, with night shifts being worked by those who have already worked a day shift. Of the 988 women workers interviewed for this report, 364 were threatened with losing their jobs if they refused to work a night shift, and 436 faced some form of punishment after refusing to work a night shift.

Of those agreeing to undertake night shifts, 60% stayed in the factory after the shift was finished in order to avoid the dangers of travelling home after 3am. As many as 70% reported not receiving any food or drink during the night shift. Night shifts frequently follow a long working day, making occupational accidents more likely due to exhaustion. One in four of those interviewed had had an accident during a night shift.

HARASSMENT AT WORK

Women workers face many forms of mistreatment in the workplace. Of the total 988 workers interviewed for this report, 718 reported being spoken to with obscene language, while 443 had been beaten and 427 hit in the face. Most alarming were reports of sexual harassment in the workplace, with 297 women reporting sexual advances and 290 being touched inappropriately. In addition to other forms of punishment such as being made to stand on tables, workers reported being subjected to threats. Of those interviewed, 484 reported being threatened with losing their jobs, 333 reported threats of being sent to prison and 328 reported threats of being forced to undress.



Photo: Julio Etchart

It should also be noted that a factory with more than 300 workers must by law have medical and nursing staff on site during all working hours. However, 790 of those interviewed stated that no doctor is available during their night shifts, meaning they are unable to access medical assistance if an accident occurs.

Finally, 60% of the workers say that night shifts cause significant problems in their family lives. Women workers reported concerns over long periods of separation from their children, particularly for women with young children who are breastfeeding. The combination of long working days, excessive production targets, frequent night shifts, paltry wages and a lack of labour law enforcement severely affects the health, family life and reproductive health rights of women garment workers. There are also entrenched cultural norms which are yet to be overcome: Bangladeshi women carry out the burden of unpaid domestic work done early in the morning or late in the evening, and for women garment workers this must be completed before and after long and gruelling working days.

THE CASE OF SULTANA

Sultana was the eldest of three children, whose father died while she was still at school. As a result she had to give up her education, as her mother was unable to bear the costs of keeping her brother and sister on her own. Sultana found work at the lowest level in a clothes factory, and was forced to work night shifts. She fell ill after two and a half months and had to leave her job. She then joined another garment factory, but again fell sick after five months.

“Whenever I started working in these garment factories, I became sick,” says Sultana. “Yet I had no choice but to continue my work as I had to bear all the family expenses, including the education costs for my brother and sister. When I fell ill at my last factory, I applied for sick leave but I was denied it. I returned to the factory after four or five days and was denied my wages.”

Sultana joined the NGWF section at the local shopping mall, in the hope of increasing her earnings and resuming her education, and in 2010 she enrolled in a secondary school. Sultana now has hope for the future: “I always wanted to pass higher secondary education and become a nurse. Now that I have resumed my studies, I am sure I will be able to reach my goal.”

Maternity rights denied

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Stitched Up Women workers in the Bangladeshi garment sector

Three in four of the women workers interviewed for this report are married, although the majority choose to conceal their marital status in their workplace due to employers' preference for single workers without family responsibilities. The 2006 Bangladesh Labour Law guarantees all women workers a total of 16 weeks' paid maternity leave: eight weeks prior to the birth of the child and eight weeks after delivery. In January 2011, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh announced that maternity leave would be extended to six months, but it remains unclear whether this will be implemented outside the civil service.

The research conducted for this report reveals that women in the garment sector have been systematically denied their rights to maternity leave under Bangladeshi labour law.

Variations in maternity leave provision across factories and a lack of awareness of workers' rights mean that this basic entitlement has long been breached. Furthermore, Bangladeshi labour law states that no woman is entitled to maternity leave if she already has two or more surviving children.

Half of the 988 women interviewed for this report stated that some form of maternity leave is provided at their workplace. However,

474 had been denied any provision when pregnant. In addition, two thirds of the women interviewed were unaware of the full legal entitlement to maternity leave. Only 24% answered correctly that they were entitled to over 100 days' maternity leave.

Even those workers who are aware of their rights struggle to understand the complex calculations necessary to determine what they are entitled to, and many of the factories that do pay maternity benefits pay less than the statutory entitlement. Many workers also have to look for new jobs after giving birth or return to the same factory at a lower grade, as they are not aware of their legal rights to return to the same grade they held before their maternity leave.

Whilst the majority of women interviewed reported that pregnant women do not have to work night shifts and generally carry out light work, 50% said that they still have to work overtime, putting both their own and their child's health at risk. In respect of their own experience, 282 of the women workers interviewed said that they had suffered humiliating treatment at the hands of their employers while they were pregnant, and 242 had been denied sick leave during pregnancy.

Ante-natal and post-natal care is rarely enjoyed unless a woman suffers particularly serious medical complications. Delivery usually takes place at home or in public hospitals, where medical facilities are poor. Just 149 of the respondents had gone to a private clinic, while almost half had spent 2,000-5,000 taka on the delivery, equivalent to a full month's salary. As many as 573 of those interviewed reported that the doctor had told them their babies were underweight.

One of the greatest concerns facing women workers in the garment industry is the large



Photo: Tarif Rahman

amount of time they have to spend separated from their children as a result of work. As many as 641 workers reported having no child facilities in their workplace, although Bangladeshi labour law requires every establishment with more than 40 women employees to provide a suitable room or rooms for the use of children under the age of six. The majority of women workers have no option but to send their children to stay with their parents in rural areas, depriving them of the right to breastfeed and of the enjoyment of bringing up their own children.

Women workers are legally entitled to paid maternity leave under Bangladeshi labour law, but most have little knowledge of their rights or of the necessary applications to employers or the doctors' certificates needed in order to claim those rights. The majority end up being fired by their employers when they become pregnant, or sent on leave without payment. As a result, many women are forced to work during the final stages of pregnancy in order to make ends meet, jeopardising the health of both mother and child.

THE CASE OF NAZERA

Nazera started working in the garment industry at the age of 16. She is one of four sisters, and her husband has spent long periods unemployed. She was forced to switch from one factory to another over the years before settling in her current workplace. Her wage has had to support her husband as well as the rest of her family, although he has now also found work in the garment industry.

At the end of her first pregnancy, and in the absence of any medical facilities, Nazera gave birth to a stillborn baby. When she became pregnant again the following year, she applied for maternity leave. "I applied to the authorities according to the law," explains Nazera, "and the management received my application as required. Yet the day I was due to go on leave, I was informed by the compliance officer that I would not be paid."

Nazera brought the case to the NGWF together with full evidence and proof of her claim. The NGWF forwarded a grievance application on her behalf, and Nazera has now received all the money due to her.

Women garment workers are the driving force behind Bangladesh's export earnings. Yet they continue to live in extreme poverty as a result of paltry wages and poor prospects for promotion to better jobs.

Many British companies source their clothes from Bangladesh because the country boasts lower labour costs than anywhere else in the world. High street retailers such as Primark, Tesco and Asda have long benefited from these cheap prices, in the full knowledge that workers in the Bangladeshi garment industry are regularly denied their basic rights. The huge profits made by these retailers depend on the exploitation of the women who make their clothes.⁴

When they have been exposed as sourcing their clothes from sweatshop labour, many companies have pointed to their own 'corporate social responsibility' initiatives in order to suggest that they are tackling the problem head on. Yet these programmes have failed to improve the situation for women workers in the garment factories of Bangladesh. It is only through the struggle of the workers themselves and through popular campaigning in solidarity with them that there is any hope of real change.

War on Want has popularised the issues raised in this report through its 'Love Fashion Hate Sweatshops' campaign. Thousands of people have already signed up to the campaign's call for action to protect the rights of women workers in the supply chains of British high street retailers. We ask all readers of this report to take the following actions and join the campaign:

1. Call on the UK government to stop companies profiting from sweatshop labour. War on Want is calling for the UK government to establish a specialised Commission on Business, Human Rights and the Environment in order to hold British companies to account for exploitation in

their supply chains. Such a commission would have the powers to investigate complaints from workers whose rights have been violated in supply chains serving British retailers.⁵ It would also fulfil the call from the UN special representative on business and human rights, John Ruggie, for non-judicial grievance mechanisms to be established at the national level to complement judicial avenues for redress.⁶

Please write to Rt Hon Kenneth Clarke QC, Secretary of State for Justice, 102 Petty France, London SW1H 9AJ, calling for the introduction of a Commission on Business, Human Rights and the Environment to protect the rights of workers in the supply chains of British retailers.

2. Call on your MP to press for an end to the exploitation of workers in supply chains overseas. Please write to your local MP asking them:

- (a) to support the introduction of a specialised Commission on Business, Human Rights and the Environment
- (b) to join the All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Corporate Responsibility: Business, Human Rights and the Environment

If you do not know the name of your MP, you can find it at www.theyworkforyou.com

3. Join War on Want and bring justice for workers across the world. It is only as a result of dedicated support from members of the public and trade unionists in the UK that War on Want can continue its campaign for workers' rights around the world. Please join us by becoming a member of War on Want today – go to www.waronwant.org/joinus or phone us on 020 7324 5046.

YES, I WANT TO SUPPORT WAR ON WANT BY MAKING A DONATION

War on Want relies on the generosity of its supporters to continue its work empowering poor people around the world. Every pound counts in our fight against injustice and inequality and we are grateful for your support.

Please fill in the whole form using a ball point pen and send to:

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giftaid it

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Postcode

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Branch Sort Code - - Account No.

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Please pay War on Want Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with War on Want and, if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank/Building Society.

Signature(s) Date

Originator's Identification Number 388240 Ref: (War on Want to complete)

Banks and Building Societies may not accept Direct Debit Instructions for some types of account

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I am not a UK tax payer (if your circumstances change, please let us know).

If you are already a member of War on Want, please pass this on to a friend so that they can join our fight against poverty. Thank you

How this research was conducted

This report presents the findings of 988 interviews conducted with women workers from 41 Bangladeshi garment factories. The interviews were conducted between March and August 2010 by War on Want partners the National Garment Workers' Federation and the Alternative Movement for Resources and Freedom Society.

All names of the women workers mentioned in this report have been changed in order to protect their identities.

Notes

¹ *FDI in Least Developed Countries at a Glance: 2005/2006*, United Nations, New York and Geneva, 2006; *World Investment Report 2010: Investing in a low-carbon economy*, United Nations, New York and Geneva, 2010. Foreign direct investment into Bangladesh subsequently fell back in 2009 and early 2010 as a result of the economic crisis.

² For more on the 2006 Labour Law, see *Ignoring the Law: Labour rights violations in the garment industry in Bangladesh*, War on Want, London, July 2009

³ For more on the living wage, see RO Tambunan, 'A Living Wage for Asian Garment Workers', *International Union Rights* (2011) vol 18, no 1, pp20-21; also *Stitching a Decent Wage Across Borders: The Asia Floor Wage Proposal*, Asia Floor Wage Alliance, New Delhi, 2009

⁴ See *Fashion Victims: The true cost of cheap clothes at Primark, Asda and Tesco*, War on Want, London, December 2006; and *Fashion Victims II: How UK clothing retailers are keeping workers in poverty*, War on Want, London, December 2008

⁵ See *The Reality of Rights: Barriers to accessing remedies when business operates beyond borders*, Corporate Responsibility (CORE) Coalition and London School of Economics, London, April 2009

⁶ *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations 'Protect, Respect and Remedy' Framework*, Final report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, John Ruggie, UN document A/HRC/17/31, 21 March 2011

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War on Want

War on Want fights poverty in developing countries in partnership and solidarity with people affected by globalisation. We campaign for human rights, especially workers' rights, and against the root causes of global poverty, inequality and injustice.

Cover picture: Women working in a garment factory in Dhaka Photo: © GMB Akash/Panos Pictures

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