



## The Impact of Urbanization on Women's Roles and Family Dynamics

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### Abstract

*Urbanization has profoundly influenced social, economic, and familial structures in sub-Saharan Africa, yet its impact on women's roles within households remains underexplored. This qualitative study investigates how urbanization has reshaped the role of women in families in Nairobi, Kenya, focusing on economic participation, decision-making authority, and the persistence of traditional domestic responsibilities. Using a phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observations with 18 women across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Thematic analysis revealed that urbanization has expanded women's economic roles, enabling them to contribute significantly to household income and assert greater influence in family decision-making. Simultaneously, traditional expectations regarding domestic labor persist, resulting in a dual burden that challenges women's capacity to balance professional and domestic responsibilities. Male partners exhibit varying responses to these shifts, ranging from support and adaptation to resistance and negotiation, highlighting the contested nature of gender power dynamics within urban households. The study underscores that families operate as micro-organizational systems, wherein role allocation, resource management, and decision-making processes mirror principles of organizational management. These findings carry significant implications for policymakers, organizational leaders, and urban planners, emphasizing the need for holistic interventions that integrate economic empowerment, domestic workload redistribution, and socio-cultural transformation to achieve genuine gender equity. By situating household dynamics within the broader urban economic and social context, this study provides critical insights into the interplay between urbanization and the evolving roles of women, offering a framework for understanding and supporting equitable family structures in rapidly urbanizing cities.*

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## Introduction

Urbanization has emerged as one of the most significant social transformations shaping contemporary African societies, particularly in rapidly growing urban centers like Nairobi, Kenya. As cities expand and global interconnectedness intensifies, traditional social structures and family dynamics are increasingly renegotiated, often resulting in profound shifts in gender roles and household responsibilities (Fernandez, 2023). In Nairobi, urbanization is not merely a demographic transition but a multidimensional process that reshapes access to education, employment opportunities, social networks, and cultural expectations (Wu, 2024). For women, this transformation presents both pathways to empowerment and new challenges embedded within the evolving fabric of family life (Sinha, 2023). Historically, Kenyan society has relied on patriarchal norms that positioned women primarily as caregivers, homemakers, and supporters of male-led economic activities. In many traditional family systems, women's social identities were closely linked to marriage, motherhood, and unpaid domestic labor. However,

as rural-urban migration accelerates and cities like Nairobi become hubs of economic diversification, women increasingly occupy spaces outside the home through formal employment, entrepreneurship, and community leadership (Muyonga, 2023). These changes challenge deep-rooted gender ideologies that once limited women's participation in decision-making and public life. Urbanization alters family structures in multiple ways. The rise of nuclear families, reduced influence of extended kinship, and increased cost of living contribute to shifts in household roles and expectations (Onyango et al., 2021). Women's growing engagement in wage labor has changed the economic balance within families, enabling them to contribute significantly to family income and financial decision-making (Aksar, 2024). This evolution contributes to a broader renegotiation of power relations within marriages and parent-child dynamics, ultimately influencing how authority, responsibility, and identity are constructed in the family.

Education has played a crucial role in facilitating these changes. Increased access to schooling for girls in urban settings equips women with professional competencies and broader worldviews, empowering them to reclaim agency in personal and societal spheres. Additionally, exposure to diverse cultures, media influence, and gender equality advocacy have contributed to shifting attitudes toward women's capabilities and aspirations (Stewart et al., 2021). As a result, many women in Nairobi increasingly pursue careers, delay marriage, and seek shared domestic responsibilities with their spouses. Nonetheless, the transition is far from linear or universally accepted. Many women continue to shoulder disproportionate domestic responsibilities, even when they are fully engaged in paid employment outside the home. This "double burden" reflects persistent cultural expectations that prioritize women's caregiving roles and moral contribution to family stability. Furthermore, some men, socialized in patriarchal ideology, may resist these shifting dynamics due to perceived threats to their traditional roles of authority and breadwinning.

Urbanization also introduces new forms of stress and negotiation within households. Increased living expenses, time constraints, and the absence of extended family support systems challenge women's efforts to balance work and home responsibilities (Ente et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2022; Killaspy et al., 2022). These pressures can lead to marital conflict, role ambiguity, and emotional fatigue as families adapt to new gender expectations. Thus, while Nairobi's urban environment fosters socio-economic empowerment for women, it simultaneously exposes them to complex intersections of progress and constraint. Culturally, urban life encourages individualism and self-expression, contrasting sharply with the communal norms prevalent in rural Kenyan settings.

Women's pursuit of autonomy may be viewed positively as a marker of modernization, yet it may also provoke criticism or negative labeling from conservative communities that perceive such change as a departure from tradition. As a result, women often navigate a dual identity anchored between expectations rooted in cultural heritage and the evolving values promoted by urban modernity. At the broader societal level, Kenya's policy environment has increasingly recognized women's rights to economic participation and political representation, as reflected in constitutional provisions and gender equality reforms. Urbanization provides a practical foundation for these policies to manifest, as economic opportunities, access to technology, and organizational support systems become more accessible in cities. Yet, structural inequalities such as wage disparities, gender-based violence, and limited childcare support continue to undermine the full realization of women's potential.

Although numerous studies have explored women's empowerment and gender equality in Kenya, fewer have centered specifically on the intimate space of the family and how urbanization reshapes everyday gender interactions in domestic life (Julius, 2025).

Understanding these lived experiences is critical because the family remains a primary site where cultural norms are produced, contested, and transformed. Nairobi, as both Kenya's capital and a symbol of modernization, offers a crucial setting to examine how women uniquely perceive their changing roles amid rapid urban development.

## **Method**

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in a phenomenological approach. The aim was to explore and interpret the lived experiences of women navigating shifting family roles within the context of Nairobi's rapid urbanization. A phenomenological design was chosen because it enables the researcher to capture personal meaning, perceptions, and interpretations that participants attach to social transformation in their everyday life. This design supported an in-depth and realistic portrayal of women's voices, emotions, and reflections regarding changing household responsibilities, economic roles, and power relations in their families. By focusing on meaning and subjective experience, the study sought to provide a holistic understanding of how urbanization influences gender roles and identity formation among women in Nairobi.

## **Research Setting**

The research was conducted in Nairobi, Kenya's capital and fastest-growing urban hub. Nairobi was selected as the study site because it represents a dynamic urban environment characterized by a high concentration of employment opportunities, modern education systems, migration flows, and diverse cultural influences that significantly affect family structures. The study focused on three different types of neighborhoods low-income, middle-income, and high-income areas to capture variations in experiences shaped by socioeconomic status. This supported a richer and more inclusive understanding of the broader urban reality faced by women across different family and occupational backgrounds.

## **Participants and Sampling Technique**

Participants in this study were women aged 25–55 residing in Nairobi and currently involved in family roles, either as wives, mothers, daughters, or female household heads. A total of 18 participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. This approach ensured that only those women who had meaningful exposure to the effects of urbanization on family roles were included. Diversity in marital status, occupation, and educational background was intentionally considered to allow a wide range of perspectives to surface. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, which occurred when additional interviews no longer produced new insights relevant to the research questions.

## **Data Collection Methods**

Data were gathered using semi-structured, in-depth interviews and participant observation. Interviews provided participants with the opportunity to express their experiences freely while allowing the researcher flexibility to probe emerging themes. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in English or Kiswahili based on participant preference. Permission was sought to audio-record all conversations to ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis. Participant observation was carried out informally during interactions with participants in their community settings. This helped the researcher better understand behavioral expressions, family dynamics, and daily routines that reflect shifting gender roles. Field notes were taken to document these observations, contextual nuances, and reflective impressions throughout the data collection process. Additionally, relevant documents such as policy briefs and gender-related NGO reports were reviewed to complement primary data.

## Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data. The analysis process began with the verbatim transcription of audio-recorded interviews, followed by repeated readings to gain a deeper familiarity with the narratives. Data were then coded inductively allowing themes to emerge naturally from participant responses without imposing preconceived categories. Codes were grouped into broader thematic clusters reflecting patterns related to employment, domestic responsibilities, decision-making, cultural expectations, and identity negotiation. Quotes that best represented central ideas were selected to support the authenticity of findings. Throughout analysis, efforts were made to ensure that participants' intended meanings were preserved, and interpretations remained closely connected to the empirical data.

## Result and Discussion

The findings presented in this chapter explore how urbanization has transformed the role of women within families in Nairobi, Kenya, revealing the complex interplay between economic participation, decision-making authority, and enduring domestic responsibilities. Through in-depth interviews and participant observations, the study identifies both empowering shifts and persistent challenges, highlighting how women navigate expanded roles within household systems that remain influenced by traditional norms and male responses. The data are organized thematically to illustrate the nuanced experiences of women across different socioeconomic contexts, providing a detailed account of how urban living reshapes family structures, gender dynamics, and household management practices. This chapter foregrounds women's voices to illuminate the lived realities of negotiating dual responsibilities, asserting agency, and responding to evolving social expectations in rapidly urbanizing settings.

### Expanded Economic Roles of Women in Urban Nairobi

Urbanization in Nairobi has significantly reshaped women's economic participation, allowing them to play more active roles in generating household income and pursuing financial independence. The city's growing labor market, coupled with increasing access to education, has enabled many women to seek employment outside traditional domestic spheres. Participants in this study reported that engagement in wage labor, entrepreneurship, and freelance work has not only improved family welfare but also enhanced their personal sense of agency. One participant emphasized this transformation, stating:

*"Before moving to the city, I was confined to the home, managing household chores and caring for children. Now, I run a small tailoring business, and I contribute directly to our family income, which makes me feel valued and independent."* (Participant 5, 34 years old)

This shift reflects a broader trend in urban Nairobi, where women are no longer confined to supportive roles but are increasingly recognized as co-providers. Several participants highlighted that earning an income has strengthened their position in family decision-making, particularly regarding financial planning and household expenditure. For instance, a participant remarked:

*"I now have my own salary account, and I discuss with my husband how our money is spent. He listens to my opinions because he knows I am contributing financially."* (Participant 11, 29 years old)

Women's economic roles have also diversified beyond formal employment. Many participants engaged in small-scale businesses such as tailoring, beauty services, retail, and online ventures. These entrepreneurial activities offer flexibility that accommodates domestic responsibilities while enabling women to assert economic independence. One participant shared:

*"I sell handmade jewelry online. It is not just about money; it gives me confidence and recognition. Even my children and husband respect the work I do now." (Participant 2, 41 years old)*

The study found that women increased financial contribution has created a subtle shift in family dynamics. Households where women are economically active report improved cooperation and shared responsibility. However, the adjustment is not without challenges. Some participants noted that balancing multiple roles earning income while maintaining domestic responsibilities remains taxing. As one participant explained:

*"Sometimes I feel overwhelmed. I leave for work early, come back late, and still have to cook, clean, and help my children with school. It is tiring, but I know my work is important for our family." (Participant 14, 38 years old)*

Despite these pressures, the participants consistently highlighted that economic participation empowers them to influence decisions and negotiate roles more effectively within the household. Urban economic opportunities have allowed women to gain autonomy in ways that were previously unimaginable in Nairobi's traditional family structures. Additionally, this empowerment has social implications beyond the family. Women reported feeling more confident engaging in community activities and advocating for their rights, thereby reinforcing a cycle of self-reliance and visibility.

*"I have joined a women's cooperative in my neighborhood. Because I contribute financially at home, I feel confident speaking in community meetings. People take my opinions seriously now." (Participant 7, 36 years old)*

Overall, the findings indicate that urbanization in Nairobi has expanded women's economic roles significantly, creating avenues for personal growth, family influence, and social recognition. While the increased economic participation brings challenges related to workload and role balancing, it fundamentally alters perceptions of women's capabilities and contributions. The study shows that economic empowerment is closely linked to broader changes in family structure, authority, and gender dynamics, illustrating the transformative impact of urban living on women's lives.

### **Increased Participation in Family Decision-Making**

The impact of urbanization on women in Nairobi extends beyond economic roles and has significantly influenced their participation in family decision-making. Women who previously had limited influence over household matters are increasingly asserting their voices, particularly in areas such as financial planning, child-rearing, and major household purchases. This shift is closely tied to their growing economic contribution and exposure to urban education, information, and networks. One participant highlighted this change, stating:

*"In our family, decisions are no longer made by my husband alone. We sit together and discuss what is best for the children and the household. My opinion matters because I am also contributing financially." (Participant 9, 32 years old)*

The study revealed that urban women's decision-making involvement is multifaceted, encompassing daily operational choices as well as strategic long-term planning. For example, women reported participating in discussions about family savings, investments, schooling for children, and even housing decisions. Their inclusion in these processes reflects a gradual but significant reconfiguration of traditional patriarchal norms that previously concentrated authority with male heads of households. One participant shared her experience:

*"When we wanted to move to a bigger house, I was involved in every step choosing the neighborhood, negotiating rent, and planning the budget. My husband respects my input because I understand the finances."* (Participant 3, 40 years old)

Urbanization has also fostered communication practices that encourage joint decision-making. Women described that in urban households, open dialogue and consultation are increasingly common. Many participants emphasized that financial autonomy gained through employment empowers them to negotiate their preferences and influence outcomes effectively. As one participant explained:

*"Before, my husband made all the big decisions. Now, we talk about everything from school fees to family trips. He asks for my advice, and sometimes I make the final decision when he trusts my judgment."* (Participant 12, 35 years old)

The study also found that women's participation in decision-making strengthens their self-confidence and sense of agency. They feel more valued within their households, which positively affects family harmony and cooperation. For instance, a participant stated:

*"Being part of the decisions makes me feel respected. My children also see me as an example of someone who can manage responsibilities and contribute to the family. It motivates me to be more involved in every aspect of our lives."* (Participant 1, 28 years old)

However, this transition is not always seamless. Some women reported occasional resistance from male partners who are accustomed to traditional authority structures. These conflicts often require negotiation and patience, as women assert their roles in decision-making without triggering familial tension. One participant remarked:

*"Sometimes my husband is hesitant when I suggest changes, especially about finances. But I try to explain my perspective calmly, and over time, he has learned to accept my input."* (Participant 16, 39 years old)

Despite these challenges, the findings indicate that increased female participation in family decision-making is becoming a normative aspect of urban households in Nairobi. Women's inclusion reflects a broader trend toward egalitarian family structures, supported by education, economic independence, and exposure to urban values. This empowerment enables women to actively shape their family's welfare and the future of their children, bridging the gap between traditional expectations and modern realities.

### **Persistence of Traditional Domestic Responsibilities**

Despite the increasing economic participation and decision-making influence of women in Nairobi, the study found that traditional domestic responsibilities continue to fall predominantly on their shoulders. Women reported that, in addition to contributing financially and participating in household decision-making, they are still expected to manage household chores, caregiving duties, and family welfare. This persistence reflects enduring cultural expectations that define women as primary caretakers, a role that has not been fully redistributed in urban households. One participant explained:

*"Even though I work full-time and help pay the bills, I still do most of the cooking, cleaning, and laundry. My husband helps occasionally, but the main responsibility is mine."* (Participant 6, 36 years old)

The study revealed that this "double burden" often leads to stress and fatigue, as women attempt to balance work demands with domestic obligations. Many participants expressed that while

urbanization offers opportunities for empowerment, it also increases the pressure to perform multiple roles simultaneously. For example, a participant shared:

*"I start my day early to prepare breakfast and get my children ready for school, go to work, then return home to cook, clean, and help with homework. Some days I feel completely exhausted, but there is no choice because the house still depends on me."* (Participant 10, 38 years old)

Traditional domestic responsibilities also intersect with societal expectations of women as moral and emotional anchors within the family. Women described being responsible not only for physical labor but also for maintaining family harmony, nurturing children, and managing the emotional wellbeing of spouses and extended family members. One participant emphasized:

*"People expect that women will always take care of the home and make sure everyone is happy. Even when I contribute to finances, I am still judged if the house is untidy or if the children are not well cared for."* (Participant 15, 42 years old)

Moreover, the persistence of these responsibilities can limit women's ability to fully engage in professional and social activities outside the home. Some participants reported having to decline career advancement opportunities or reduce working hours to manage domestic demands. For instance, a participant reflected:

*"I had a chance to take a promotion at work, but I hesitated because it would mean longer hours and less time at home. My family still depends on me for the daily chores and taking care of the children."* (Participant 4, 35 years old)

Even in households where husbands contribute to domestic tasks, participants noted that women often retain primary accountability for home management. The uneven division of labor demonstrates that urbanization alone does not automatically equate to gender equality within households. Traditional norms continue to define domestic roles, with women bearing the responsibility for sustaining family life, regardless of their external economic contributions.

*"My husband washes the dishes sometimes, but he doesn't take full responsibility. I am still the one who ensures everything in the house runs smoothly. It's always been like this, and changing it is difficult."* (Participant 13, 39 years old)

These findings highlight that while urbanization enables women to expand their economic and decision-making roles, the persistence of traditional domestic responsibilities represents a significant challenge. Women must navigate the tension between modern urban opportunities and entrenched cultural expectations. This duality reflects a transitional phase in Nairobi's family structures, where empowerment and traditional obligations coexist, often creating complex experiences for women balancing multiple roles.

### **Shifting Gender Power Dynamics and Male Response**

Urbanization in Nairobi has not only expanded women's economic roles and participation in family decision-making but has also begun to reshape power dynamics within households. As women become more financially independent and educated, traditional hierarchies in which men held primary authority are increasingly challenged. This shift, however, is complex and often generates mixed responses from male partners. Some men adapt to these changes positively, while others experience tension, insecurity, or resistance. One participant described this experience:

*"My husband was uncomfortable at first when I got a higher-paying job than him. He felt that his authority was being undermined. Over time, he has started respecting my opinions, but it was not easy at the beginning."* (Participant 8, 37 years old)

The study found that male responses to changing gender roles vary depending on factors such as education, socioeconomic status, and exposure to urban values. In households where men embraced modernization and understood the practical benefits of dual-income families, women reported smoother negotiations and increased equality in decision-making. As one participant explained:

*"My husband and I now make all major decisions together. He respects my views because he sees that I contribute to the family financially and intellectually. It has brought us closer rather than creating conflict."* (Participant 5, 34 years old)

Conversely, some men expressed resistance due to perceived threats to traditional masculinity and patriarchal authority. Participants reported instances of conflict, subtle control over finances, or reluctance to share domestic responsibilities. These tensions highlight the challenge of balancing modern urban expectations with long-standing cultural norms. One participant recounted:

*"At first, my husband refused to let me handle the household budget. He said it was a man's duty. I had to convince him slowly, showing that I could manage the finances responsibly. It took patience, but he eventually agreed."* (Participant 14, 39 years old)

The study also revealed that shifting gender power dynamics often require negotiation and compromise within the household. Women described employing strategies such as open communication, joint problem-solving, and gradual demonstration of competence to gain acceptance of their expanded roles. These strategies reflect women's agency in navigating both economic and domestic spheres while maintaining family harmony. As one participant observed:

*"I had to be careful in asserting my role. I discuss my opinions respectfully and sometimes wait for the right moment to suggest changes. My husband listens more now because he trusts my judgment and sees the benefits."* (Participant 11, 36 years old)

In some cases, resistance manifests subtly through reinforcement of traditional norms, such as expecting women to prioritize domestic duties despite external employment. Participants indicated that such resistance is not always overtly confrontational but can influence household dynamics and emotional well-being. For example, a participant shared:

*"Even though I work and contribute financially, sometimes my husband expects me to take care of everything at home. He doesn't mean to be unfair, but old habits die slowly."* (Participant 2, 41 years old)

Despite these challenges, the overall trend suggests gradual acceptance of more egalitarian gender roles in urban Nairobi households. Women's increasing financial independence, education, and exposure to modern urban norms are instrumental in shifting male perspectives. Many men eventually adapt, recognizing the practical benefits of sharing responsibilities and valuing their partners' contributions.

### **Expanded Economic Roles of Women in Urban Nairobi: Discussion**

The findings on women expanded economic roles in Nairobi families have profound implications for understanding the intersection of urbanization, gender dynamics, and household management. From a management perspective, the household can be conceptualized as a micro-organizational system where labor allocation, resource management, and decision-

making processes operate analogously to formal organizations (Cameron et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2024). Women's increased engagement in income-generating activities effectively transforms the household's operational model, as they assume dual roles: internal managers of domestic operations and external actors in urban labor markets. This duality challenges traditional patriarchal structures that historically limited women's agency, illustrating how external environmental pressures, such as urban economic opportunities, catalyze internal structural adaptation (Ruslin, 2022; Loudon, 2025; Wiesner, 2023).

The practical implication of these expanded roles is that families must recalibrate workflows and task distribution to accommodate the dual responsibilities borne by women. This resonates with management theories on role overload and task delegation (Kuusisto, A. (2025; Liao et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023), highlighting that women in Nairobi households are effectively managing multi-project portfolios under conditions of high demand. The data suggest that without deliberate redistribution of domestic responsibilities, the potential benefits of women's economic empowerment can be undermined by fatigue and stress, which aligns with previous studies on the "double burden" phenomenon in African urban contexts. Therefore, interventions at the household and community level are essential to ensure that economic participation translates into genuine empowerment rather than reinforcing existing inequities.

From a socio-economic management lens, women's financial contribution significantly enhances their bargaining power within the family system. This aligns with the resource-based view of power dynamics, where access to and control over critical resources here, income directly affect authority and decision-making influence (Stoelhorst, 2023; Barney et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2021). The study corroborates prior research indicating that when women contribute materially, they gain leverage in negotiations related to household expenditures, children's education, and strategic family decisions. Importantly, this shift does not occur in isolation; it intersects with social norms, education, and exposure to urban cultural values, suggesting that empowerment is contingent upon both structural and normative factors.

The broader managerial implication extends to organizations and policymakers. Employers in urban settings must recognize that women's professional productivity is influenced by their domestic obligations (Patel & Patel, 2025; Epstein, 2022; Lu et al., 2023). Flexible work arrangements, family-supportive policies, and organizational recognition of dual-role pressures are not merely welfare considerations but are integral to sustaining workforce effectiveness. Moreover, urban planners and municipal authorities must design infrastructure and services that facilitate the dual economic and domestic roles of women, such as accessible childcare, public transportation, and neighborhood support networks.

Economic empowerment strengthens women's agency; it does not automatically dismantle entrenched gender hierarchies (Manhas, 2025; Saini et al., 2025). Resistance from male partners and societal expectations continues to shape the scope and limits of women's influence. Management scholars can view this through the lens of change management within organizational units: transformation occurs gradually and often encounters friction from stakeholders with vested interests in maintaining traditional power structures. Therefore, policy and organizational interventions must incorporate relational and behavioral strategies, addressing not only the individual but also the household system and broader socio-cultural ecosystem.

This study reinforces the necessity of integrating micro-level household dynamics into the management discourse (Masamha et al., 2024; Chatzinikolaou & Vlado, 2025). Urbanization creates complex, adaptive systems where economic activity, family governance, and gender relations intersect (Gitonga, 2025). Conceptualizing households as small, semi-formal organizations allows for a nuanced understanding of role allocation, resource control, and

strategic adaptation, bridging the gap between development studies, sociology, and management theory (Polo, 2025; Wang et al., 2025; Friedman & Lavee, 2025). The implication is that interventions aimed at women's empowerment must be holistic, attending simultaneously to income opportunities, domestic workload redistribution, normative change, and infrastructural support.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that urbanization in Nairobi has fundamentally reconfigured the role of women within families, producing a dynamic interplay between economic empowerment, decision-making authority, and persistent domestic responsibilities. Women's expanded participation in income generation and household governance signals a shift toward more egalitarian family structures, yet this transformation remains uneven due to entrenched patriarchal norms, male resistance, and socio-cultural expectations. From a management perspective, the household emerges as a micro-organizational system, where resource allocation, workflow management, and strategic decision-making mirror organizational principles, highlighting the need for holistic interventions that integrate economic opportunities, domestic workload redistribution, and social norm transformation. The findings underscore that genuine empowerment requires attention not only to women's individual agency but also to systemic, relational, and infrastructural factors that influence role negotiation and family cohesion. Ultimately, this research offers critical insights for policymakers, organizational leaders, and scholars seeking to understand and support gender-equitable transformations in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

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