SOCIO-ECONOMIC VOICES

"Charting Socio-Economic Progress in Next Decade: Child Labor to AI, Climate Change, and the Gig Economy"

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Global Lessons from the Expert: Women's Equity Policies that Can Propel Change in India

Intro: This week on Socio-Economic Voices we have an exclusive interaction between former DGP **Sutapa Sanyal** and senior journalist **Mahima Sharma**. Join us on a journey of discovery on Indiastat, as Ms Sanyal shares a holistic vision for socio-economic progress, touching on child labor eradication, climate change impact on women, AI's role in diversity, and strategies for women's resilience in the gig economy. She navigates through these critical intersections, offering fresh perspectives on the ever-evolving landscape of women's work fields and beyond with a vision towards the next decade. Read on…

MS: Child labour is often intertwined with women's socio-economic struggles. What new initiatives and policies are needed towards eradicating child labour to contribute to the empowerment of women?

SS: When women are educated, they have greater say in the decision making of households and their children are less likely to be involved in child labour. Educated women are also more likely to send their children to school regularly which means lower absence or drop-out rates.

Thus, long term educational programmes like **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Scheme, Udaan Scheme and Mahila Samakhya Programme** that aim to empower women through education and skill development, are key to the fight against child labour also.

Poverty is still one of the significant causes of child labour. Hence, a generation of aware, educated, skilled and gainfully employed women, with access and control over family assets and resources, will be the key to combating child labour.

New schemes that promote financial literacy, skilling, and easy access to credit amongst women shall form the mainstay of economic strategies to fight child labour.

Income-generating activities (IGAs) like helping women to start small businesses, scale up existing ones, and participate more robustly in commercial activities will also help tackle the poverty-child labour nexus.

It is also crucial to make efforts to recruit and train women for enhancing the effectiveness of the Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation Systems (CLMRS) as it has been observed that female monitors are significantly more likely to identify child labour cases than male monitors.

This virtuous cycle of empowered women creating strong child protection systems also strengthens families, the communities and ultimately the nation. Curbing or eradicating child labour in the current generation of children will

also create empowered women in the coming generations as today's girls will become tomorrow's women.

However, social change is not linear and single point interventions or working in silos do not generate the required "escape velocity" needed for social change.

Hence other factors, like registration of FIRs under suitable sections of the The Child And Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, Bonded Labour Act or ITP Act and timely completion of the investigations; **doing away with certain lacunae in the existing legal provisions; robust implementation of rehabilitation measures for children rescued from child labour; and creating and building the capacity of multi-stakeholder committees** which work closely with community members/facilitators will contribute exponentially towards curbing and eradicating child labour.

MS: The concept of Universal Basic Income (UBI) is gaining attention. How might the implementation of such a system impact women's economic empowerment, especially in societies where they face systemic barriers?

SS: UBI can greatly enhance women's dignity and economic empowerment by reducing gender-based income inequality, and augmenting women's economic and financial security. It can also ensure their economic autonomy and help them combat the prevailing barriers of unequal access to employment and capital accumulation opportunities.

UBI can also reduce women's unpaid domestic and care-work work burden as they would have the ability to "buy" time, opportunity, and outsource certain services.

A regular income enhances women's overall wellness, provides greater freedom to make choices and helps them develop resilience to face economic shocks in fast changing times such as ours.

UBI can enable women to undertake risks and become entrepreneurs in areas of their choice and as per their convenience, while balancing their life and work.

However, a multi-pronged, multi stakeholder strategy, which combines both inclusive financial growth as well as removes all the systemic psycho-social, cultural and legal barriers which women face in the country is also needed simultaneously to take care of the current aspirations and future empowerment of this half of the population.

MS: Climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable communities, with women often facing heightened risks. What kind of new socio-economic policies need to be implemented to address the impact of climate change on women, ensuring they are not further marginalized in the future?

SS: The Sendai Framework recognised that climate change is a disaster-risk multiplier for women and that they are the most important stakeholder in any global climate crisis risk mitigation strategy.

Similarly, the SDGs and other international conventions and protocols like the UNFCCC and the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) also visualize a gender action plan to incorporate a gendered perspective in the mitigation, adaptation, capacity-building, technology, finance and communication related to climate alterations and climate disasters.

Govt of India's Public Health Guidelines for Flood Events (MOHFW), Indian Public Health Standards (IPHS), 2022, National Health Mission, National Disaster Management Plan, National Program on Climate Change and Human Health (NPCCHH) also outline the strategy to be adopted in keeping with the international frameworks.

Hence, countries must apply the gender lens to design socio-economic policies around the following core ideas, on a regular basis as well as sporadic event-based basis:

- As women are most vulnerable to diseases and food insecurity due to climate shocks, it is crucial to **allocate resources and provide targeted social welfare,** health, nutrition and shelter to them
- Women generally tend to spend cash transfers on well-being measures for the whole family, so **cash transfers to women in the immediate aftermath** of climate disasters are important
- When households slip down the economic ladder, the reduced expenditure on health, nutrition, medical assistance, education etc hit women and girls in the family harder. This needs to be recognized and provided for.
- During climate related disasters, women suffer disproportionate mortality[1] and hence **green and climate resilient hospitals, community-based health workers, and bodies disseminating targeted welfare schemes** must prioritise women's health during such times
- Environmental degradation forces them to search far and wide for resources like firewood and water, because of which women and girls become more vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault. Hence, **emergency delivery of fuel and water** to the doorstep through schemes like Ujjwala become crucial.
- Greater awareness regarding all aspects of climate change is required. So, educating, empowering and harnessing women as key stakeholders, repository of knowledge, caregivers and powerful agents of social change can help governments and agencies implement sustainable and culturally acceptable interventions.
- Better preparedness through **effective engagement and communication with women and girls about how climate scenarios** could affect their lives and what resources they have locally available and what else is externally needed is important.

1. **Additionally, investment in skills and capacity building among women is also needed in-order to foster leadership and strengthen their economic resilience whenever adverse events take place.**
2. At the policy level, gender mainstreaming and gender sensitive budgeting which applies a gender lens to all climate-related targets and their interlinkages is critical
3. Similarly, a robust reporting, monitoring and evaluation process on all related indicators can help keep all the stakeholders involved, towards the goals set out for women
4. A multi-sectoral approach with the interlinkages clearly defined also needs to be promoted for greater efficiency
5. Collection of disaggregated data and its correct interpretation is also significant for adopting measures which strengthen women socially and economically so far as the climate -related risks are concerned.
6. In order to evaluate the successful implementation of policies all the markers related to health and other outcomes related to women must be taken into consideration.

MS: Organizations do express commitment to POSH but fall short in their actual practices. How do discrepancies between policy statements and real-world practices be balanced out to ensure a good socio-economic well-being of women employees?

Every piece of legislation has a context in which it is created and embraces both the letter and the spirit of the law.

POSH came into existence in 2013, about a decade and a half after the Vishakha Guidelines. The intent behind this legislation was to motivate, "nudge" and encourage women to step into the workspace and contribute their optimal best which could eventually lead the country to leverage the benefits of gender-balanced workspaces. The safety and security of the working woman, whether in the organized or unorganized sector, was at the core of this legislation.

It spoke of the prevention and prohibition of sexual harassment of women at the workplace and provided a redressal mechanism should such an incident occur.

However, despite all the efforts of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs and the MWCD as well as the judgements of the courts, **many organizations still view POSH only as a compliance issue, as opposed to being a fundamental**

aspect of Talent Development (attracting the best female talent and retaining them by providing safe and inclusive workspaces within their organizations).

This is largely due to the systemic/implicit biases existing against women in the society at large. Hence, **the first step needed is to change the mindset of the organizational heads. Industry-wide and even in government run initiatives, educating the CXO level leaders becomes the key to transformative change.**

Moreover, women too are still afraid of the prevalent "victim-blaming" in society and hence succumb to the "sub-culture of silence" and do not speak up even when they are facing sexual harassment at the place of work.

The unfavourable outcomes of the "Me Too" movement have also acted as a deterrent for many women in similar situations.

Accordingly, **to tackle these challenges, a government-led, multi-stakeholder, AI driven platform that delivers customized training to employees on POSH** will go a long way in ensuring the socio-economic well-being of women by ensuring that the end beneficiaries/users can get the help they need and whenever they need it.

MS: Artificial intelligence is becoming integral to HR practices. In your opinion how can India leverage AI to enhance Diversity & Inclusion efforts, ensuring fair opportunities for women and creating a socio-economically equitable work environment?

SS: As an integral part of HR practices, AI can become a very potent tool to fulfill the diversity agenda in Indian workplaces and help Indian women participate in the workforce by accessing better career opportunities and resources.

Indian companies can leverage AI to widen the talent pool, eliminate unconscious bias in their hiring, and create truly diverse organizations from top to bottom.

Similarly, AI can assist companies in being more equitable and unbiased throughout the employee lifecycle by taking measures to bridge the gender gap, enhance the diversity of the workforce and promote equity and inclusion.

(1) AI can help **recruitment and onboarding** in the following ways:

- Ethically built AI algorithms can anonymise the candidate data, and remove all potential biases related to gender demographics from the hiring cycle, so that companies can assess skills, based on objective data points and experience. **This can be facilitated by adopting blind hiring process by redacting, filtering and masking demographic information like gendered language (such as name, pronouns, gender) from resumes, and removing all potential points of bias** to create more inclusive and socio-economically equitable workplaces
- Indian companies can build AI frameworks that reduce the problem of unconscious bias and leverage analytics and visualisation to **understand diversity within each stage of their hiring cycle, and focus on competence**
- AI can also **scan job descriptions to modify the language into being more inclusive,** and thereby attract a more diverse and expanded talent pool
- Unlike humans, **AI is not limited in time and energy,** so they can screen a wider talent pool to achieve a more diverse workforce, giving opportunities to candidates that might otherwise be filtered out.

(2) Talent management and talent retention can be facilitated by AI in the following way:

- Helping organisations to identify where diverse candidates are falling off, tracking the complete hiring process in order to provide actionable insights
- Work to support selected candidates throughout their lifecycle within the company

- Identifying specific departments where diversity seems to be lagging
- Facilitating and analysing feedbacks, interactions, and internal communications to create diversity insights and more inclusive environment
- Connecting diverse employees based on shared interest and career goals to provide an inclusive and collaborative environment and tackling issues of underrepresentation, specially of women in the organization

(3)Training and capacity building

- AI can also be leveraged to provide **customised D&I learnings for people in the organization.** Chatbots, virtual assistants, educational learning tools and interactive trainings can be designed to help people imbibe diversity and inclusivity values
- They can also generate ongoing diversity **conversation within the organization that supports marginalised employees** and creates a more socio-economically equitable workplace
- Get feedback and allow **diverse voices to be heard**
- AI tools can also be used to anonymously support women and other marginalized communities in **safely reporting issues of the workplace and delivering solutions** through targeted interventions and trainings and capacity building

MS: Considering the unforeseen disruptions such as pandemics and geopolitical shifts, how can fostering economic resilience among women contribute to overall societal stability and progress? What strategies should governments and organizations adopt for a more resilient female workforce?

SS: We're living in unprecedented times. Adverse events like a global pandemic or geopolitical shift impact women more than men, because women are more likely to be employed in the informal sectors (about 82 percent of working women in India are in the informal sector, without adequate safety nets of social security or healthcare)[2].

They also have fewer assets to fall back on (due to gender-skewed inheritance customs), have a higher burden of unpaid care duties at home and have less financial agency and less access to credit. They are thus more economically vulnerable to financial shocks and may have less avenues for securing future income than men.[3]

On an average, being about half the population of countries across the world, women are crucial to every recovery and rebuilding after economic shocks due to events like COVID 19 pandemic or climate crisis, and all rebuilding efforts need to be inclusive and conscious of gender equity.

Nearly, 65 percent of the total female workers in India are employed in agriculture[4], but they don't hold land titles, which leaves them excluded from many government schemes that mandate land holdings. Hence there is a need for better implementation of legislation that protects and supports women's right to land titles.

- **Economic resilience and growth relies a lot on capital accumulation, so women must be encouraged to save, own property and grow their personal assets.**
- **Inheriting familial wealth is also a significant way for women to build intergenerational wealth and economic prosperity.**
- **They must be encouraged to learn their rights, and be provided adequate financial, technological and legal training to exercise them.**

It has also been found that women who have insurance coverage and access to financial instruments like savings cards before a crisis hits, are more resilient in its aftermath.[5]

Encouraging women to have **sufficient savings in the bank, insurance coverage, community support, increased access to financial services like easy credit, vocational and skill development training, financial literacy,**

functional property rights are key to helping women in the informal sector recover to become resilient and recover quickly when required.

India's spend on healthcare remains at around 2 % of GDP[6], but women do not have the same level of healthcare access that men can afford. Strengthening the Accredited Social Health Assistant (ASHA) programme, where women community health workers deliver healthcare interventions and advocacy for women at the household level, is the key to improving women's health outcomes which in turn fuels their economic resilience.

In the formal sector, equal opportunities and DEI initiatives such as initiatives that help women who had taken a break for care duties return to work, policies like childcare benefits, senior citizen insurance for elderly dependents of women, flexible work-from-home options and comprehensive insurance will help tremendously in helping women be economically resilient and bounce back from these shock events.

MS: Looking ahead, what policies do you envision organizations implementing to ensure the economic inclusion and advancement of LGBTQ employees, and are there global examples that can serve as inspiration?

SS: In a survey, LGBT+ employees in India identified that they want to see employers demonstrate their commitment to LGBT causes, carry out workplace initiative on inclusion and diversity, measure up to the UN standards and collaborate with LGBT+ advocacy organisations.[7]

These are the policy trends I see most employers moving towards, in order to enhance their inclusive workplaces. For example Karnataka's job reservation for transgender persons or TATA Steel's offering financial support for gender reassignment surgeries[8].

As diversity and inclusion initiatives become more mainstreamed in the corporate sector in India, we are experiencing several LGBT+ initiatives like:

– **"Blind Applications"** where job seekers can choose to only share their first or last name, and details such as gender, caste, religion etc are omitted from application

– Companies participating in **pride job fairs** that aim to provide job seeking opportunities specifically for LGBT+ candidates

– Creating **formal internships and employment practices** that center the LGBT+ community

– And establishing specific policies like **Gender Affirmation and Transition** in the workplace for providing more inclusive environments. However, while larger corporate companies have strong LGBT+ inclusion practices, smaller businesses, government sector and the informal sector continue to be difficult environments for LGBT+ employees to feel included in.

Accordingly, I see more employee resource groups for LGBT+ employees being provided resources for leadership training, talent development and community support. **Companies are also focusing heavily on providing healthcare and other comprehensive benefits to LGBT+ employees including transition support, as well as insurance coverage and other benefits for same sex partners**. Externally too, companies are continuing to demonstrate their commitment to LGBT advancement by using inclusive imagery in their products and client communications. Every year Apple releases a special edition Apple Watch for pride and the proceeds are donated to support LGBT charities. This involvement of the product with their D&I practice reflects that commitment to LGBT causes is at the core of the company's philosophy and not just peripheral.

Globally, one of the most exciting initiatives is a new global partnership- the Partnership for Global LGBTI Equality, formed by a consortium of multinational companies in collaboration with the World Economic Forum (WEF) to help businesses accelerate the inclusion of LGBTI people globally.

Companies like IKEA and Microsoft have also been involved in the creation of the UN Standards of Conduct for Business on Tackling Discrimination against LGBTQI People which is a policy framework for companies to realise LGBT equality and inclusion.

Similarly, companies like Coca Cola have offered transgender inclusive healthcare insurance coverage to employees; IBM has a business development team that focuses on retaining and supporting LGBT talent and Oracle highlights LGBT+ content from its employees on its public platforms.

MS: Looking globally, which countries or regions have successfully implemented policies supporting women's equity in the workforce, to witness significant socio-economic benefits? How can India learn from and adapt these best practices?

SS: The USA established the White House Gender Policy Council to ensure that gender equity and equality are at the forefront of America's domestic and foreign policy.

Canada introduced the Gender Results Framework (GRF) to track how the country is currently performing on gender equality. It identifies six key areas where change is required, and includes indicators to track success or failure. It also developed Gender-Based Analysis plus (GBA+), to assess the impact of policies, programmes and initiatives undertaken

In Japan, the Act on the Promotion of Female Participation and Career Advancement, under which employers with 100 or more employees are required to disclose information regarding female participation and advancement in the workplace, provide support for women's leadership within the organisation as well as make action plans to facilitate women's participation in the workplace. Japan has also unveiled initiatives to promote women in entrepreneurship and women and girls studying or working in STEM.

Switzerland has implemented a mandatory wage equality audit, whereas **France** has a Gender Equality Index which identifies indicators of pay, wage and promotion differentials and the solutions to eliminate them.

India too could implement a Gender Council or Framework which mandates guidelines and indicators for employers above 50 or more employees to advance gender equity.

Having said that, back home, major decisions like stringent legislations for crimes against women, prevention of sexual harassment at workplace or the setting up of **One Stop Crises Centres; policy statements, mandates, directives, circulars and government orders like reservation in local self-governments, the maternity leave, creche facilities at the workplace, mentoring during maternity leave to facilitate a smooth comeback, period leave, as well as small actions like provision of transportation for women employees for working way beyond office hours, are examples of equitable measures adopted by the Govt and corporates to advance equality of women by taking the route of equity.**

The special schemes to empower women and girls through education, skilling & micro-financing like Beti Bachao, Beti Parhao, cash transfers to keep the girl child in school and preventing child marriage or child labour are also examples of trying to establish gender equality, starting with diversity and taking the route of equity and inclusivity.

MS: As new industries emerge, what steps can be taken to ensure that women are not only represented but thrive in these sectors? How might the socio-economic landscape shift with increased female participation in cutting-edge fields beyond traditional STEM disciplines?

SS: According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), women hold just 26% of AI roles worldwide[9].

Girls are getting educated at a higher rate than ever before, even in STEM fields, but that is not translating into workforce entry, retention and career growth in high tech fields like AI, machine learning, block chain, etc. With the high job growth in cutting-edge fields, women trying to enter these fields need to be systematically promoted as they face information deficit, find little support from families in career planning or professional career counselling and are largely unaware of the growth in high tech careers.

Several programmes are tackling this deficit already. Globally, #AIForWomen, aims to upskill more than 100,000 women globally in AI and Machine Learning. In India too AICTE offers free courses to train women in these emerging technologies as do companies like Microsoft and SAP which run multi stakeholder programmes that aim to develop female workers. Cities like Chennai also run AI for Women programmes for upskilling women in these new technologies. But a lot more remains to be done.

We need early investment in women to learn these technologies. Schools and universities need to provide more support for women in the emerging fields, including mentoring and networking programmes. A dedicated government portal helping women to understand what opportunities are available in hi-tech industries and help them plan out their careers would be extremely impactful.

Recruitment and promotion of women needs to be incentivized by the government and industry wide-bodies. Companies can **diversify recruitment, and train women employees within their organizations** to transition to high tech roles too. Similarly, the government can support current female workers to **upskill and transition to high tech industries, similar to programmes run in countries like Singapore.** We could adopt policies like the Netherlands that provide tax deductions for training for those already in the workplace.

Finally, just as we have established a quota for women in board positions, we can also establish a **gender quota in new and emerging technology industries as a short or medium-term measure.**

The socio-economic landscape would be positively impacted by these small and yet significant measures as female participation in cutting-edge fields beyond traditional STEM disciplines increase.

MS: The gig economy is on the rise globally. How can women be empowered to actively participate in and benefit from this trend, and what socio-economic transformations could stem from increased female engagement in gig work?

SS: The Indian gig economy is expected to reach about 23.5 million workers by 2029-30, according to the NITI-Aayog[10] but women still make up a very small part of it, focusing on domestic work, beauty services, healthcare and education.

Socially and economically, the gig economy is providing greater autonomy, flexibility and financial independence and agency to women who are saddled with extensive care responsibilities at home. It helps millions of women, especially new mothers and homemakers, stay in the workforce on their own terms, instead of dropping out completely because they can't find the flexibility they need at different stages of their life. It's great even for returning women employees who wish to re-enter the workplace to try out a particular sector as well as gain upskilling and referrals within it. It improves the women's socio-economic status both within and outside the family and in turn adds to the GDP of the country.

However, these women are especially vulnerable, as the majority of Indian female gig workers rely on gig work as their primary source of income. Thus, it is necessary to establish a new regulatory framework which ascertains liabilities and penalties for platforms when women's safety and rights are compromised. Ensuring the safety and

protection of women in the workplace— where the workplace can be anywhere, including clients' homes— is a challenge but it can be solved using video technology, real time tracking services, emergency buttons, and transparent and fair dispute resolution methodologies.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 defines "workplace" as "any place visited by the employee during the course of employment" including the transportation. **Gig workers should be included in the act. They are currently excluded because most gig companies treat them as independent contractors.**

It's also imperative to encourage women gig workers to **form unions or participate in labor organizations for negotiations.** In July 2023, Indian women gig workers, backed by the **All India Gig Workers' Union,** organised protests against unfair work practices of a particular gig platform, indicating that the increased digital and economic empowerment of women in the gig economy also can lead to a rise in women's ability to organize and advocate for their own rights.

Lastly, **providing tax breaks or other fiscal incentives to gig companies that have women as one third of their workforce,** and encouraging the rise of women-led, women-run and women-centric gig platforms is also crucial for socio-economic changes.

[1] World Health Organization. Gender, climate change and health. 2014.

[2] https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf

[3] (Miles, Wiedmaier-Pfister, and Dankmeyer 2017)

[4] https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=148196#:~:text=As%20per%20Census%202011%2C%20Sixty,increased%20to%2023%25%20in%202011.

[5] https://www.womensworldbanking.org/insights/the-pandemic-impact-on-women-in-india-insights-on-financial-resilience-fallback-position/

[6] https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1894902

[7] https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/in/Documents/about-deloitte/in-ad-Deloitte-LGBT-at-Work-Survey-India-report-noexp.pdf

[8] https://hr.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/workplace-4-0/diversity-and-inclusion/how-india-inc-is-ensuring-inclusion-for-lgbtq-employees/89033182

[9] https://www.weforum.org/publications/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality/

[10] https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-06/25th_June_Final_Report_27062022.pdf

About Sutapa Sanyal

As the first woman to become Director General of Police in U.P. and the recipient of the President's Police Medal for Distinguished Services, sutapa Sanyal founded and led the U.P. Police Mahila Samman Prakoshth, an award-winning police unit wherein she designed and implemented innovative gender-sensitive and child-friendly interventions, based on the Public-Private Partnership model. A recipient of several prestigious national awards, she was also recognized as an "Indian Woman Leader " by the British High Commission and was the only Indian invited to address the INTERPOL's ISGCAC'17.

She served as the Chairperson of the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) of UP Police, Advisor (Security) to GAIL India Ltd and Member, Advisory Committee, CARA (MWCD, GoI) and Micro Mission 07 (MHA/BPR&D). Ms Sanyal is the co-founder of D&I India Consultants and currently works as an Independent Consultant to KSCF, US.

Sutapa Sanyal is a TEDx speaker as well as a consultant, trainer and advisor on Diversity & Inclusion, Women's Leadership and Child Rights. She has delivered powerful talks and training at leading corporations, industrial bodies, NGOs, training institutions and Government organizations, as well as presented papers at academic institutions.

About the Interviewer

Mahima Sharma is an Independent Journalist based in Delhi NCR. She has been in the field of TV, Print & Online Journalism since 2005 and previously an additional three years in allied media. In her span of work she has been associated with CNN-News18, ANI - Asian News International (A collaboration with Reuters), Voice of India, Hindustan Times and various other top media brands of their times. In recent times, she has diversified her work as a Digital Media Marketing Consultant & Content Strategist as well. Starting March 2021, she is also a pan-India Entrepreneurship Education Mentor at Women Will - An Entrepreneurship Program by Google in Collaboration with SHEROES. Mahima can be reached at media@indiastat.com

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