

Journey of Rural Woman Empowered Through Educational Struggles to Become a University Teacher

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of a Brahmin woman from rural western Nepal to understand how gender norms, sociocultural ideologies, and familial structures have shaped her educational and professional trajectory. Using a qualitative life history research design, the study focuses on an in-depth narrative of a woman (pseudonym: Nandi) who was married at a young age and confronted various socio-cultural expectations that confined her to traditional domestic roles. Despite these constraints, Nandi's journey demonstrates how personal agency, coupled with familial support especially from her father and later her husband created pathways for educational empowerment. The study employs thematic analysis grounded in feminist and sociocultural perspectives to unpack how gender ideologies and rural power structures were negotiated at the household level. Findings of this study reveal that emotional support from family members, flexible educational arrangements, and institutional access played pivotal roles in enabling her to pursue higher education after marriage and childbirth. Nandi's story illustrates the transformative power of education in redefining a woman's identity beyond conventional gender roles and highlights the importance of intra-family dynamics in facilitating or hindering women's empowerment. Her narrative underscores that while patriarchal structures persist, they are neither monolithic nor unchangeable; rather, they can be re-negotiated through relational agency and strategic family alliances. The study concludes that in order to promote gender equity in rural Nepal, educational policies must account for socio-cultural realities and emphasize community engagement, family support mechanisms, and institutional flexibility to support women's lifelong learning and empowerment.

Introduction

Nepal has diverse (Bista, 1991) in geographical location: Mountain, hill, and terai. Similarly, rural and urban areas are divided based on different levels of infrastructure development. Rural areas have less infrastructure development compared to urban areas. Urban areas have better access to education, transportation, healthcare, and other facilities. People in rural areas generally have fewer aspirations compared to those in urban areas due to limited opportunities and resources.

Nepalese society is patriarchal and largely male-dominated. The prevailing ideology among Nepali men is that women should serve men. However, women are actively struggling for empowerment within their families and society. Their struggle is further challenged by socio-cultural barriers, which create obstacles in accessing education and securing employment opportunities. This case is particularly an issues in the society where there is less priority of education for female. Mostly rural parts of Nepal have such problems. Schools of rural areas far from the house and most of the rural people are engaging in agricultural. So, care of younger children should be handled by the elder children. Specially, female have more responsibility to care the younger children. Likewise, caring of pet animal is another duty for them (Tamang, 2000). However, the literacy rate of children in Nepal has gradually increasing per year. One the one hand literate and education priority people and so-called upper caste support their children to education and focusing on government job. On the other hand clever female and so-called upper caste women struggle for the education by using their language agency to convince to their parents and get education. The ideology of caste-based systems also affects educational priorities and influences an individual's interest in pursuing education. Similarly, government policies at different levels (central, provincial, and local) regarding female education also impact access to education.

This study was motivated by a specific moment of inspiration while watching an interview program on Nari Television, which centered on women's empowerment. The program featured a female journalist interviewing a woman who shared her life story, highlighting both the challenges she had faced and the achievements she had attained. This interview, which I watched in its entirety, became a turning point for me. The woman had struggled immensely to establish herself as an academician. Her determination and resilience balancing childbearing, child-rearing, managing a business, and pursuing education deeply inspired me. This single-day event prompted a deeper reflection on the complex journey of rural women in creating their personal and professional identities. It ultimately led me to undertake this study, aiming to explore the struggles, strengths, and empowerment pathways of women through education.

Women empowerment refers to increasing the political involvement, social leadership, involve in educational development, and economic strength of individuals and communities of women (Khayyal et al., 2021). This concept encompasses a range of initiatives aimed at enhancing women's rights and opportunities, enabling them to gain control over their lives and contribute effectively to society. Empowerment can occur at various levels, including individual, community, and societal, and often involves fostering an environment where women can make choices and have access to resources that support their growth and development.

The central level government made free and compulsory education until basic level. Similarly, free education class 9 to 12 class (The Government of Nepal, 2015). However, female is not getting education like male. The total literacy rate of female is according to 2078 census is 69.4 percent (National Population and Housing Census, 2021). Whereas the male literacy rate is 83.6 percent. female. Weak thought 'agency' regarding female (measuring capability of working) due to fatalism (Eikeland, 2018) made backward the female. Bir Shamser had initiated the movement for educating women, emphasizing the importance of their education (Sharma, 2069). Thus, such efforts made parents to educate daughter. Those parents educate their daughter who has capacity and understand about the value of education. Khayyal et al. (2021) mentioned that the United Nation outlined five key components of women empowerment: Women's sense of self-worth, right to have and to determine choices, right to have access to opportunities and resources, right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home, and ability to influence the direction of social change to create more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. In this line women are looking for the self-value, and determine choice for the future life secure and opportunity to utilize the community resource, for women have power to control within and outside the home, for that women are struggling for the empowerment. This study seeks to explore the transformative life experiences of rural single women, highlighting how their educational struggles have shaped their identity, fostered empowerment, and enable to them to enter and contribute meaningfully to the academic domain as university teachers.

Methods and Materials

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Creswell, 2007) mentioned that specially focuses on single participants. The research participants can be taken from the range of one to twenty-five (Adhikari, 2021). Even a single person data or information can be taken for narrative inquiry research approach. The information is collected through the telling experiences of an individual (Creswell, 2007). The participant of this study Nandi (pseudonyms) was a female teacher of a reputed university in Nepal.

Inspiration from a Televised Interview

One day, I was watching an interview program on Nari Television, which focused on women's empowerment. In the program, a female journalist interviewed a woman who shared her life story, highlighting the challenges she faced and the achievements she made. The woman had struggle immensely to establish herself as an academician. Her determination and resilience deeply inspired me to reflect on her journey of creating a personal and professional identity. I watched the entire interview and was particularly moved by how she balanced childbearing, child-rearing, and managing a business all while continuing her education. This made me to study about her struggle for empowering.

Her story made me deeply curious to explore her struggles and journey toward becoming an assistant professor. Motivated by this interest, I visited her and expressed my intention to study her life experiences using a narrative inquiry approach. She willingly accepted my request and agreed to participate in the research. At the time of my visit, her mother was also present. I took the opportunity to speak with her mother and included her perspectives as part of the study.

I conducted a series of interviews with Nandi, focusing primarily on her life experiences from childhood to the present. These interviews centered on her struggles for personal and professional empowerment. In this research, Nandi served as the key informant, while her mother was included as a secondary participant. I used her mother's responses to triangulate the information provided by Nandi, which helped enhance the credibility and depth of the data collected.

Data Collection Process

During my focused interviews with Nandi, I aimed to maintain a natural and comfortable setting to ensure authenticity and openness in the conversation. To respect the flow of her narrative and create a non-intrusive environment, I intentionally avoided the use of recording devices and formal field notes. Instead, I engaged in active listening and paid close attention to the details of her oral accounts. The information was collected through a biographical narrative inquiry, allowing Nandi to share her life story in her own words and at her own pace. (Kim, 2016) mentioned that biographical narrative inquiry includes oral history that focusses on individual's life story. I listened her struggle story about study carefully then I wrote her life experiences of her absent but for the conformation and trustworthy member check was applied. Manually inductive (Thomas, 2006) codes, certainties, and themes (Stirling, 2001) were developed for the discussion of the result. I was able to explore a range of barrier and struggle faced by the participant.

Results and Discussion

In this title I have presented my participants information in thematic based. Starting from Nandi (pseudonyms) her personal background and end to her present situation.

Socio-Cultural Background of the Participant

Nandi belongs to the Brahmin community and is a rural woman from the hilly region of western Nepal. During her schooling years, around the time of the 2048 B.S. (1991 A.D.) national census, the overall literacy rate in Nepal was only 39.6 percent. A significant gender disparity existed, with the male literacy rate at 54.5 percent, while the female literacy rate was considerably lower at just 25 percent (CBS, 1991). This context highlights the structural challenges Nandi faced in accessing education as a girl growing up in a traditionally patriarchal and rural society (National Population and Housing Census, 2021). In that time, most of the parents' ideology from her community was to provide primary education for daughter. She completed her school living certificate (SLC) in 2054 BS.

Academic and Professional Achievements of the Participant

Nandi, the female participant of this study, has demonstrated remarkable perseverance and commitment to her education. She successfully completed her Master's degree with first division and later earned an MPhil degree with the support of a fellowship from the University Grants Commission (UGC), overcoming numerous personal and professional challenges. She has since commenced her PhD studies and is currently employed as an Assistant Professor at a well-established constituent campus of a reputed university in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal.

Following her marriage 26 years ago, Nandi relocated to an urban area, where she has been residing in her own home for the past 13 years. Her professional experience spans 17 years in the business sector, four years of teaching at the school level, and four years of teaching at the university level. She was ranked first in the competitive selection process for a secondary-level teaching position in her subject and similarly achieved top ranking during her appointment as an Assistant Professor at the university level. These accomplishments reflect her dedication to academic excellence and professional growth. Nandi expresses:

I got marriage at the age of 17 years in that time I had just given the exam of SLC. In present situation this is child marriage. The propose of marriage was taken by my school's head teacher, who was the maternal uncle of my husband. So, I cannot reject his purpose. After married I am living in urban with my family. Presently I have 23 years son and 21 years daughter. My Son is a high skill foreign employee after his bachelor's degree as a risk manager and daughter is studying

bachelor's degree. And my husband is also assistant professor of a Tribhuvan University.

Despite entering into marriage at the age of 17, a practice now recognized as child marriage and influenced by socio-cultural pressures and family hierarchy, the participant has navigated her life journey with resilience, achieving personal and familial advancement, as evidenced by her children's educational and professional accomplishments and her husband's academic career.

Educational Progress and Personal Struggles

Nandi's educational background was strong at the school level, which contributed to her opportunity to relocate to Kathmandu after marriage. Although she came from an educated family background, she faced significant constraints in pursuing higher education due to early marriage, business responsibilities, childbearing and rearing, and various household duties. Despite these challenges, Nandi consistently expressed a strong internal motivation to read, write, and become an empowered woman. She shared her determination to manage her own time effectively in order to continue her education. Reflecting on her journey, she articulated her struggles with deep sincerity, stated: 'I have faced more struggle to study after marriage, because I have managed multiple roles, which were family role, community role, business role and reproductive role.

She wanted to become a empower women and her parents also had a dream of pursuing higher education and successes her. For succussed women she continued her studied whenever she had leisure time and after her family members had gone to sleep."

Nandi further expresses: I had a dream since childhood to become a successful woman in a respected institution, where many people would recognize me and know my identity. I wished that if I ever passed away, the institution would declare a holiday in my honor, and people would remember me for my contributions. To achieve this, I made a daily study plan and remained committed to my education. Despite the challenges of raising children, I successfully completed my academic qualifications. Finally, I achieved my goal and became a lecturer at a prestigious university in Nepal.

Nandi is a Brahmin community female. She was born in a hilly region, western part of Nepal. Main occupation of her parents' is agriculture. Her father was an Indian retired army. Her mother is a housewife. She is a youngest child of her parents. She has two elder brothers. Now one brother is a foreign employee and another is engaging in business Nandi remembers her childhoods and said:

When I was four years old, my father retired from the Indian Army. After his retirement, he spent a lot of time caring for me and showing me love. He often took me on trips during holidays and fulfilled all my wishes. He always supported me

and loved me more than anyone else in our family I was like a princess to him. Since my father retired at a young age, he went back to India for work. He quickly got a permanent job at a bank. However, in his absence, I struggled with my studies. Although I was an average student, I had to take care of our pet animals, which made it difficult to focus on school. As a result, my academic performance kept getting worse.

Feeling helpless, I wrote a letter to my father, explaining my struggles. I told him that taking care of the domestic animals was a big distraction and was keeping me away from my studies. I also wrote, "If you were here, I could study well. If you truly want me to have a better future, please come back home and give me the time I need to focus on my education."

After reading my letter, my father felt very sad. He realized how much I was struggling and decided to quit his job. Without any delay, he returned home to support me. With his guidance and encouragement, I was able to study regularly. As a result, I secured the first position in my class 6 to 10. My father and the whole family were overjoyed. From that day on, he always motivated me to focus on my studies and do my best. Unfortunately, he passed away three years ago, and I miss him every day.

Nandi was good in her study. The family background of Nandi was good. All family are intellectual. They supported and motivated her. Nandi further expresses: "My younger brother is also good at his studies. He always encourages and motivates me in my studies. He understands the challenges that hinder my learning and helps make studying easier for me. He loves me very much. I have two sisters-in-law who support and help me with my studies. Similarly, my elder brother has been working abroad since completing his SLC. He always motivates me and encourages me to focus on my studies".

Nandi remembered her whole family members. And again said: "My grandfather had five sons and one daughter. Among them, one worked abroad, two served in the Indian Army, one was a priest (Pandit), and one was engaged in agriculture. He had 10 grandsons and 12 granddaughters. Among them, Nandi was one of his grandchildren who completed an MPhil and joined a PhD program".

The family had the ideology of educating sons until the SLC qualification, while daughters were educated only up to the fifth grade, except for the exceptional case of Nandi. Her father wanted to study up to the bachelor's level, so he bought land in the Terai for that purpose.

Duty of Animal rearing and effect the Nandi's education

Nepal is an agricultural country. Most of the rural Nepali people are engaged in agriculture. Farming is the part of agriculture. The parents' interest was seeking support their children to their occupation. So, children help them equally they

absent to their school. The absent children do not cover their study. That caused they become difficult to fulfil their aim Nandi expresses her childhood:

My parents wanted me to receive higher education, although our family profession was agriculture. Sometimes, when I was in class 5, I had to take care of the animals, which disturbed my education. At that time, my beloved father was working in India. When he learned about my situation, he returned home and focused on supporting my studies. After that, I became the top student in every class throughout my school years. However, my uncle and aunt did not support education for their children, which resulted in their sons and daughters having lower educational attainment.

Father's Strategic Investment in the Terai: A Step Toward Supporting Higher Education

In an effort to address both health concerns and educational aspirations, my father made a strategic decision to purchase agricultural land in the Terai region. Due to health-related dietary restrictions, he was unable to consume maize-based meals and preferred rice instead. Sharing the same dietary preference, our family benefited from cultivating rice on the newly acquired land. More importantly, this investment was also motivated by his long-term vision of supporting my pursuit of higher education. The acquisition of land thus served a dual purpose: ensuring a stable food supply compatible with his health and generating resources to facilitate my academic advancement.

Negotiating Education within Marriage

Nandi's experience during the pre-marital discussion, Nandi clearly articulated her primary condition for marriage the continuation of her education. As she recalled in her interview, "I had a question for my becoming husband: 'May I continue my study after SLC?'" This statement highlights that education was her foremost priority at the time of marriage. According to cultural tradition, the prospective bride and groom were expected to converse privately before giving their consent. If both parties agreed, the families would then proceed with the formal marriage arrangements. This process demonstrates how Nandi actively negotiated her educational aspirations within the cultural framework of arranged marriage.

At the time, Nandi had already appeared for the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) board examination and was awaiting her results. She recounted, "My husband went to talk with my parents for marriage" (Interview with Nandi). Initially, both families agreed to arrange the wedding in December. However, due to pressing family obligations and the need for support in his business, her future husband insisted on an earlier date. As she explained, "He had to manage family problems and needed support in the business. So, he forced his parents to arrange the marriage before December. That caused our marriage to be held in July 1998"

Nandi further reflected that the urgency of marriage was driven by her husband's need for immediate assistance: "My husband was in a hurry to marry me to solve family problems and for business support." Despite her commitment to education, the demands of marriage and motherhood soon interfered with her academic progress. She noted, "I left one subject exam because of my delivery".

Nandi's narrative reflects the complexities faced by women in balancing educational aspirations with familial responsibilities, particularly within the context of early or arranged marriage. Her story illustrates both her agency in asserting her educational goals and the structural challenges that limited her ability to pursue them fully.

After Marriage and Higher Education: Family Expectations vs. Practical Support

Nandi further expresses her experiences regarding higher education, following

"I became part of an academically oriented family. My father-in-law was not only a pandit (Hindu priest) but also actively involved in social work. My husband and his elder brother were both teachers, while his younger sister worked as a health worker. Another brother-in-law had completed Intermediate of Arts (IA) level. From the beginning, all family members expressed that I should continue my studies. However, despite their verbal encouragement, no specific time or supportive environment was provided to actually pursue higher education.

This contradiction between expressed expectations and lack of practical support created significant challenges. Over time, my husband's elder brother advanced to become a professor at a university, the younger brother became a businessman, and the younger sister secured a position as a third-class officer in the Government of Nepal. These achievements reflect the academic and professional orientation of the family.

Nevertheless, my personal experience within this family context reveals a common gap between promoting education for women in principle and enabling it in practice. The family's academic identity did not necessarily translate into structural or emotional support for my own educational journey.

The participant's experience highlights a critical gap between rhetorical support for women's education and the absence of practical, structural backing within an academically inclined family setting.

Challenges in Pursuing Higher Education after Marriage

Pursuing higher education after marriage presents unique challenges for female, particularly within traditional family structures. Balancing academic aspirations with household responsibilities, limited spousal or familial support, and

societal expectations often hinder their educational progress. In this regard Nandi express:

"After marriage, I found it very difficult to allocate proper time for my studies despite being in an academic family. I managed to complete my Intermediate level education by studying privately. However, when I enrolled in the Bachelor's level, the challenges became more significant. Unlike the Intermediate level, private study was not an option in the Bachelor's program because it included practical subjects that required regular campus attendance.

Although I was officially enrolled, at Mahendra Ratna Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu. I was not able to attend regular classes, including the practical sessions. Participating in practical work posed many challenges. Group work was a requirement in practical classes, but I was excluded from group activities since I was new and unfamiliar to most of my classmates. As a result, I was forced to complete group practical work alone.

Despite coming from an educational background, the journey through Intermediate and Bachelor's levels was filled with obstacles. Initially, I did not join the education faculty with the intention of becoming a teacher. I chose it because I believed it would be relatively easier for me to manage alongside my family responsibilities. However, the reality of managing academic expectations without institutional support or peer collaboration made my academic journey extremely challenging.

Nandi's narrative highlights the profound challenges faced by married women in pursuing higher education, even within academically supportive families, when institutional structures and social dynamics fail to accommodate their unique needs. It underscores the urgent need for more inclusive and flexible educational environments that support women balancing academic aspirations with familial responsibilities.

Turning Point: Achieving Success in Higher Education

Nandi remembered her experiences and express: After overcoming numerous challenges and successfully completing my Bachelor's degree, the situation in my life began to shift positively. My perseverance and dedication were eventually recognized, and my husband expressed happiness and support for my academic progress. Encouraged by this change, I worked even harder during my Master's degree in Population Studies. As a result of my commitment, I graduated with first division marks. Motivated by this success, I enrolled in another Master's degree in the same field under the Faculty of Education. At that time, Population Education was a newly introduced subject at the Master's level. Despite the novelty of the program and the added responsibilities in my personal life, I remained determined to continue my academic journey.

The participant's journey illustrates how personal determination, coupled with gradual familial support, can transform initial struggles into academic success, ultimately enabling her to pursue advanced studies despite ongoing personal and institutional challenges.

Quality Won the Favoritism and Nepotism

The selection presents the academic and professional progression of a woman who pursued dual master's degree, engaged in civil service and teaching preparation, and achieved appointments at both school and university levels through merit-based completion.

Nandi said her academic qualification: "Nandi holds a Master of Arts in Humanities and a Master of Education in Population Education from Tribhuvan University. While managing a bookshop during her studies, she was inspired by students preparing for the Lok Sewa examinations. With family support, she joined civil service preparation classes but had to undergo surgery during that time. Advised by her doctor to consider teaching, she shifted her focus and successfully passed the Teacher Service Commission exam, becoming a secondary-level Social Studies teacher in Kathmandu. After five years of teaching, she qualified as a university lecturer at Tribhuvan University, realizing her goal of contributing to higher education".

Despite existing practices of favoritism and nepotism, academic qualifications, disciplined preparation, and competence led to her success in securing competitive teaching positions.

Overcoming Mobility and Technological Challenges During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The covid-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges to education systems worldwide, particularly in terms of mobility and access to technology. This study explores how students and teachers navigated restrictions on movement and limited technological resources to sustain learning. It highlights the adaptive strategies employed to overcome transportation barriers, digital divides, and connectivity issues, offering insights into resilience and innovation in times of crisis.

Regarding this Nandi expresses "The school where I taught was about 14 kilometers from my home. When the COVID-19 lockdown was lifted and schools reopened, public transport was hard to access. I asked a colleague for a ride, but he refused—despite the fact that I had supported him during his Master's by sharing academic materials. Determined to be self-reliant, I bought a scooter within three days and resumed commuting. Soon after, the second wave of COVID-19 hit Nepal, and university classes shifted online. I improved my computer skills to adapt to virtual teaching. Around the same time, I sat for the Assistant Professor exam under

the Tribhuvan University Service Commission, passed, and was selected first. I was then posted to a campus that felt remote to me".

Despite mobility and support challenges during COVID-19, the individual showed resilience by securing transport, adapting to online teaching, and achieving career advancement through determination and self-reliance.

New Responsibility Assigned in Campus

The campus teacher are required to take both teaching and administrative roles, which enhance their professional capacity and empowers them in their academic careers.

I was newly appointed as an assistant professor at the campus, where the position of coordinator was vacant. The coordinator's role involved regulating classes by facilitating teachers in conducting their sessions and managing student attendance. Additionally, the coordinator was responsible for marking teachers absent if they failed to conduct their assigned classes.

Taking on the coordinator role added administrative duties, helping me grow in leadership and responsibility alongside teaching.

Engagement in Career Development

Engagement in career development involves actively pursuing opportunities for professional growth, skill enhancement, and long-term advancement. It reflects a commitment growth, skill enhancement, and long-term advancement. It reflects a commitment to continuous learning and adapting to changing academic and instructional demands

In this regard Nandi expresses: "The University where I am employed provided capacity-building training during the initial period of my appointment, which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, I was assigned to a campus located far from my residence, but I was transferred closer to my home after ten months. During this period, I gained diverse professional experiences. I undertook responsibilities such as serving as an observer for university final examinations, as well as acting as an internal and external evaluator for theses, teaching practice, and practical sessions in my subject area. Additionally, I participated in two international conferences and several national conferences, actively engaging in research across various sectors. I have published multiple research articles and contributed to some books. These experiences, along with my active participation in conferences and seminars, have significantly empowered me in my academic career. Furthermore, I have successfully completed my MPhil degree, which has further enhanced my scholarly skills and professional development joint PhD".

The university's training and diverse professional roles during the pandemic significantly enhanced academic skills and carrier development. Active

participation in research, conferences, and advanced studies empowered the faculty and strengthened professional development.

Discussion

Nandi's story reflects the ongoing struggle for gender equality in Nepal, where traditional patriarchal norms continue to shape women's access to education and opportunities, particularly in rural settings. Despite national improvements in female literacy rising to 69.4% by 2021 (CBS, 2021) many girls like Nandi faced early obstacles, including household responsibilities and pressure for early marriage, which are still prevalent in many communities (UNFPA, 2021; Ghimire & Samuels, 2017). Her determination to pursue education, even after marriage and motherhood, highlights how family support, especially from a spouse, can play a pivotal role in enabling women's empowerment (Tamang, 2022). As she juggled household duties, school responsibilities, and later professional roles, Nandi embodied the triple burden commonly shouldered by Nepali women (Budhathoki, 2020). Her journey also illustrates how educated women are not only changing their own lives but also influencing gender norms within their families and communities. Nandi's experience thus supports the argument that education can be a transformative force in challenging gender inequalities and fostering women's active participation in both private and public spheres.

Conclusion

This study highlights the ongoing socio-cultural and structural challenges faced by rural women in Nepal, such as gender discrimination, caste hierarchies, early marriage, and limited access to education and decision-making. Despite these barriers, women show resilience and a strong desire for personal and community transformation through education. Nandi's story illustrates how education empowers women and challenges traditional norms, benefiting entire communities. The intersection of gender, caste, and socio-economic status continues to shape women's roles in family, school, and society. Empowering women through inclusive education, gender-sensitive leadership training, and community awareness is crucial for social justice and sustainable development in Nepal.

Based on these findings, policymakers and educators should prioritize gender equity in education, increase women's leadership participation, and remove socio-cultural barriers to advance women's progress, which will positively impact both individuals and national development.

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