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CHILE’S WOMEN: VICTIMS OF AN ECONOMIC MIRACLE OR PRODUCTS OF SOCIETY?

Karen O’Donnell

In the 1990s an increasing number of developing countries began to search for the perfect economic strategy that would lead to sustained economic development and growth. Many economists focused on the Chilean model that was instituted under Pinochet. A supporter of the reforms claimed that “Chile has demonstrated that making hard choices and following through on them will eventually pay big dividends. The important message at the heart of the (Chilean) experience is: No pain, no gain.” (Tough Choices..., p. B6) Ironically, what this important message fails to mention is that those who have suffered and who have made sacrifices are not on the receiving end of the “big dividends.” A significant portion of the Chilean population has yet to reap the benefits of the economic reforms instituted under Pinochet. In particular, the people who live in the poorer areas of Chile have been forced to bear the brunt of the pain while the upper class has begun to see the benefits of the economic reforms. “Democracy in the Nation and at Home” became a well recognized political slogan in the mid-1980s. (Shallat, 1998) Despite the significant role that Chilean women from all socio-economic levels played in the restoration of democracy, little has been done to rectify the damage that Pinochet’s free-market model created. In order to gain a better understanding of Chile’s women, it is necessary to understand their current position in society. In terms of overall economic position, the poorer women have seen little change or improvement. It is true that women are playing a more significant role in the labor market; however, the positions that they occupy are concentrated in the lower-paying sectors of employment. Educational opportunities have opened up for many of Chile’s wealthier women, but the poor women are still not much better off. Education is not a priority for women living in poverty. In addition, the educational system is often criticized for promoting a curriculum that does not encourage girls and young women to seek opportunities outside of the home. From a
social and religious perspective, Chile still remains a very traditional country which focuses on the woman's role as mother and wife in the home. Consequently, this has not allowed for the development of a strong feminist movement since the end of the Pinochet regime. Finally, in the political sphere, women are beginning to participate on the national level. In recent years, several women political leaders have emerged and assumed leadership roles. However, many obstacles still exist within the political parties and institutions themselves which inhibit these women. The following sections deal with each of these aspects of the life of Chilean women with a special focus on the complexities of their relationships with the government and the Catholic Church.

Chilean Women in the Labor Force

In terms of the overall financial situation, statistics show that Chilean women simply are not equal to Chilean men. According to Alberto Etchegaray, President of the National Commission to Overcome Poverty, "They [women] live more and there are more. Everything else is less." (Etchegaray) For example, in the 1980s, females who were heads of households received only 50 percent of the wages that were received by male heads of households. In addition, more than half of these women were employed in the informal sector where work is very unstable and does not guarantee a steady income. Fewer than one-third of the men were employed in the informal sector during this same time period. (Montecinos, 1994, p. 229)

Teresa Valdez, Director of FLASCO, a university associated with the social sciences throughout Latin America, recognizes that many women are forced to make a choice between their family and their career. In choosing to enter the labor market, women are often made to feel guilty for "abandoning" their families and homes. (Valdez) Consequently, women who are active participants in the labor force take on the dual responsibilities of their full-time positions both inside and outside of the home. In conjunction with a full-time position, this amounts to 81 hours of work per week, which is 69 percent above the number of hours that one is legally allowed to work in Chile. (Valenzuela, p. 168) Despite the fact that many Chilean women are working outside of the home, they are still responsible for the maintenance of the household with little to no sharing of domestic tasks.

Once women manage to join the labor force, there are no laws in Chile to protect against sexual harassment in the workplace. The problem of sexual harassment is quite prevalent in the textile and agricultural industries, both of which employ a significant portion of the female labor force. (Valenzuela, p. 163) According to Maria Rozas, the general secretary of Chile's leading union confederation (CUT), few women actually complain, but the problem is very serious. Recently, problems have arisen in high schools, banks, universities and hospitals. (Gonzalez, Aug. 17, 1997) Yet there is no protection for female workers. The male-dominated legislature has yet to consider this problem as an issue serious enough to warrant legislation.

Many of Chile's poorer women are employed in the agricultural sector. Lidia Casas, a legal researcher for La Morada, a women's non-government organization, claims that the lack of regulation of this export-oriented industry is a disadvantage to the women. (Casas) For women involved in the agricultural sector of the economy, there are no health care benefits programs or child-care programs. In addition, the work that is available in the agricultural sector is very unstable, and therefore there is no guarantee of work from year to year or even from season to season. (Valenzuela, p. 163) If there is a bad growing season, the women are out of work. The sexual division of labor in the agricultural sector also means that women are expected to do the tasks that require a "softer touch," such as cleaning and packing fruits and vegetables, whereas men are more likely to occupy management positions.

Obstacles in Education

In the field of education, women are beginning to make more and more advancements. However, educational opportunities are not equal across all social classes. Women in the upper levels of society, who come from wealthier families, are far more likely to attend institutions of
higher learning. Differences in educational opportunities are even more obvious between rural and urban women. The illiteracy rate for urban women was 4.4 percent in 1990, whereas the illiteracy rate for rural women in this year was 17.5 percent. (Arensburg, p. 99) Because of their increased levels of education, paid employment has been far more accessible to women in the upper and middle classes. In addition, the middle- and upper-class cultural attitudes tend to be more accepting of women in the labor market. (Valenzuela, p. 169) A 1993 survey found that 64 percent of upper-class women work, 41 percent of middle-class women work, and 27 percent of lower-income women work. (Montecinos, 1994, p. 27) It is important to note that upper-class women also have increased access to domestic help, which significantly decreases the burden of the work in the home.

According to Teresa Valdez, many women tend to focus their studies in the fields of design, fashion and services. (Valdez) And as Montecinos adds, “Women remain concentrated in occupations typified as feminine.” (Montecinos, 1994, p. 166) These areas of study tend to result in low-paying career opportunities. The domestic service sector is a clear example of this. Ninety-five percent of domestic workers are female. (Chaney, p. 177) Many women feel that the current educational system needs to be reevaluated because it teaches Latin American girls that their place is in the home. Nearly 50 percent of all illustrations in textbooks in which women are represented show them performing some sort of activity in the home. (Arensburg, p. 105)

Chilean society allows little social mobility, especially for the women who are heads of households in poor communities. As a result, these communities tend to value education less than do middle- or upper-class Chileans. In fact, some poor women feel that an education would be useless. (Etchegaray) The education that they receive cannot compete with the education that the children in the upper levels of society receive. Their classrooms do not have the resources that grant them the competitive edge that they need in the labor market. Unfortunately many young Chilean women are expected to take on an increased role in the home when their mothers enter the labor force.

Their responsibilities as a woman at home become the priority. Education loses its value in the face of survival.

Ironically, statistics have shown that women face increased levels of wage discrimination as their levels of education increase. In 1996 women in the highest income bracket who were as qualified as their male counterparts earned only 54.2 percent of the income that men received. (Gonzalez, August 13) But in the lower paying jobs that do not require a strong educational background, women earn 85 percent of the income that men receive. (Kissman and Silva, p. 40) The incentives for a woman to pursue an education are therefore not strong. The higher the level of education, the greater the increase in the gender earnings gap.

The “Feminization of Poverty”

There has also been a “feminization of poverty” in Chile since the beginning of the Pinochet regime. The economic reforms that were instituted under Pinochet resulted in prolonged periods of unemployment for many male heads of households. Consequently, women were often forced into the labor force in order to compensate for the loss of family income. (Valenzuela, p. 168) As more and more men moved away to the cities to find jobs and the economic tensions worsened, family instability increased. (Montecinos, 1994, p. 228) In 1970, the percentage of poor households headed by women was about 20 percent. (Montecinos, 1997, p. 229) By the late 1980s, this figure had doubled. Nearly half of the nation’s households were being run solely by women. (Montecinos, 1994, p. 226)

Given the fact that there has been an increase in the number of households headed by women, it is not surprising that the issues of health care and social security have become increasingly important to women. Because many women are employed in jobs that offer seasonal or unstable work, they are guaranteed few or no social security benefits. Consequently, many of the children of the women who are employed in these seasonal sector jobs do not have any sort of health care coverage either. (Montecinos, 1994, p. 226) Claudia Nuñez claims that the health care system is not
balanced. (Nuñez) The people who live in the wealthier communities receive better care, but the resources are not available in the poorer communities. Waiting periods for even the most minor medical procedures are often very long. Sergio Aguilo, Chairperson of the Health Commission, has stated that only 2.5 percent of GDP is spent on health care. (Aguilo) That is one of the lowest percentages in all of Latin America. For example, in Nicaragua and Columbia the percentages of GDP spent on health care are 5.8 and 3.6 respectively. (Arensburg, p. 31)

The private pension fund system in Chile also works against women. A woman may put the same amount of money into her private fund as a man puts into his; but because it is anticipated that she will live longer, she receives a smaller payment when she retires. Because women have a higher life expectancy, they receive lower pensions. (Montecinos, 1994, p. 170) According to Armando Barrientos, a professor at the University of Hertfordshire, “Changes in family formation, with a dramatic decline in fertility and a rise in the proportion of women who are unpartnered heads of household, highlight women’s need to accumulate independent pension entitlements.” (Barrientos, p. 126) Unfortunately, private pension fund systems do not really seem to have recognized this need. According to Barrientos, there is a significant gender gap in private pension funds. Barrientos explains that women lack consistent work patterns due to family obligations. Women often leave the work place to have children and return only on a part-time basis. Another reason that he gives is that women simply cannot afford to put as much into their private pension funds because of financial responsibilities in the home. A third reason that Barrientos offers is the actual design of the pension funds. They simply are not conducive to saving for many women because of their inconsistent work patterns. (Barrientos, p. 126)

Women and Politics in Chile

Politically, Chilean women are making progress. Their concerns are beginning to be recognized by the government. In 1991 the Servicio Nacional de la Mujer (SERNAM), a government body dedicated to women’s issues, was created. (Buvinic and Gupta, p. 272) Yet, there are still some major obstacles that inhibit their participation in politics. Lily Perez, a young representative of the Renovacion Nacional Party, is from a large middle-class district. She claims that being a woman in politics is a challenge in such a “macho” society. She admits that she has faced a great deal of criticism from others because of her decision to pursue her own career interests. Perez also complains that the media tends to idealize female politicians. They are viewed as successes simply because they are female, but their actual credentials are often not discussed. She does not feel that women politicians should receive special attention from the press simply because they are women; she feels that the media’s focus on her gender has taken attention away from her political agenda. (Perez)

Fanny Pollarolo, a female representative from the Socialist Party, claims that there are two main obstacles faced by Chilean women who want to become involved in politics. The first is traditional gender roles that confine women to the family. The second obstacle is the political institutions themselves. (Pollarolo) It often seems that the parties are one of the larger obstacles to women’s access to institutional power. (Arensburg, p. 157) The Partido Demócrata Cristiano, the largest party in Chile and the party that dominates the governing coalition, is an example of the lack of female representation within the political parties. In 1991, only five of the seats on the party’s national board were occupied by women. In the Unión Demócrata Independiente, a major right wing party, only two of the party’s twenty-six seats were occupied by women. (Arensburg, p. 169) One can assume that other parties are similar in their female leadership patterns. Women tend to be politically active at the grassroots level, but this sort of work does not earn them a place at the national leadership level.

The Role of the Catholic Church

The role of religion in the plight of women cannot be ignored. Chile is an overwhelmingly Catholic country, and the Catholic Church has heavily influenced Chilean law. For exam-
ple, both divorce and abortion are illegal in Chile. Another law that emphasizes the reproductive ideology of the Catholic Church states that “female sterilization is permitted for strictly medical reasons (only) with the prior authorization of the husband.” (Arensburg, p. 156)

In addition, there is only limited funding available for sex education and family planning information. Many women simply are unaware of the methods of contraception that exist today. The fact that abortion is illegal in Chile does not stop women from getting illegal abortions, however. Thirty-five percent of all pregnancies still end in abortion. (Shallat) In addition, since abortion is illegal, there are no safety standards or regulations. Improper methods and unsanitary conditions have resulted in serious complications and even death in 18 percent of the estimated 159,000 abortions performed yearly. Also, because divorce is illegal women and men are forced to stay in unhappy and sometimes violent situations. There is also a high risk of coercive sex and unwanted pregnancy compounding the problems that already exist with the issues of abortion and the use of contraceptives. (Shallat) The patriarchal attitude of the Catholic Church is exemplified in the laws concerning marital property. In Chile the husband is responsible for the management of his wife's personal property. (Arensburg, p. 144)

Between 1985 and 1994, fourteen to seventeen percent of teenage girls gave birth in Chile (p. 41). These adolescent births contribute to a multitude of other problems. Child welfare, nutrition, school attendance and economic security of both the mother and child are problems that have a direct relation to teenage births. (Kissman and Silva, p. 41)

As previously mentioned, Chilean law also prohibits divorce. Men and women often move on to new relationships without ever having legally ended the previous relationship. The direct result of this is a significant number of illegitimate children in the Chilean population. Unfortunately, paternity is not really an issue in Chile. A woman really has no way to prove that a man is the father of her child. According to Lidia Casas, a lawyer who specializes in women's issues, “The man says no and that is enough.” (Casas) The issue of paternity is not questioned further if the man denies it. As a result, the men are not legally responsible for the children. This causes a great burden on the mothers of these illegitimate children, especially if the relationship terminates.

Understanding Pinochet and the Neo-Liberal Economic Model

It is quite obvious from the information presented so far that women do not receive the same treatment as men in Chile's patriarchal society. To most, it would seem inevitable that the women of Chile would eventually combine to make their voices heard. Several times in the past two decades, groups of women have banded together for various causes; however, because of economic and cultural differences, the women's movement had never really gained a significant base of support from all of the classes of society. But Pinochet's economic reforms, in conjunction with his traditional views of a woman's role in society and politics, forced women from all socio-economic backgrounds to organize for a common cause: the betterment of all Chilean women. According to Pinochet, “Women are essentially spirit, not flesh; they belong to the world of values, not of necessities, which determine their life project.” (Lago, p. 32) It was this attitude that helped to consolidate the women's movement under the
Pinochet regime. Women from all social classes felt the effects of Pinochet's military regime and his economic policies, and they recognized the need for cooperation from women from all classes of society.

In order to understand the effects that Pinochet's rule had on the people of Chile, one must first understand the basic principles that were the foundation of his rule. There are two basic concepts that Pinochet used as the foundation for his military dictatorship. First, he claimed that his regime was going to defend and preserve the family, which he viewed as one of the most traditional and fundamental institutions. (Valenzuela, p. 167) The second aspect of his regime was economic reform, and to this end Pinochet used the neo-liberal model. In order to understand the implications that this model had for the Chilean economy and the Chilean people, it is necessary to understand the basic elements of the neo-liberal model, which are as follows:

1. A high economic growth rate is ensured by efficient resource allocation.
2. The allocation of resources must align with international demand, thus supporting the theory of comparative advantage.
3. Productive resources reach maximum efficiency in a free market economy.
4. All social groups will eventually benefit from economic growth.
5. Privately-owned and operated enterprises are more efficient than state-owned and operated enterprises.
6. The foundation of political freedom is found in economic freedom. (Lago, p. 22)

Certainly several of these principles are the basic principles of economics that are followed by many countries throughout the world. And certainly these very same principles have led to high levels of success in many countries. But in a country like Chile where stark differences exist between the social classes, there are going to be obvious winners and obvious losers. Those who already have wealth are going to benefit the most from this model, whereas those without any wealth are going to find it harder to lift themselves out of poverty. The main fault of this model is that it does not provide any sort of redistributive measures or social programming for the people who are going to lose out.

For example, the neo-liberal model claims that all social groups will eventually benefit from economic growth. However, time has shown that poverty and indigence are still quite prevalent in lower income groups, specifically in households headed by women. ("Poverty Reduction...") People in poorer regions of Chile simply do not have the resources to allow them to compete with the wealthier social classes. Women who are heads of households are rarely given the opportunity to get ahead because everything that they earn is used for the maintenance of the household. Perhaps if they were given some assistance from the government, the vicious cycle of poverty could be broken.

In addition, the neo-liberal model also relies quite heavily on the principle of comparative advantage for international trade. One of Chile's clear comparative advantages is cheap unskilled labor. It is true that this may allow more people to enter the labor force as more jobs are created by foreign investment. However, the wages that these unskilled laborers receive are minimal because they are so easily replaced. In the early-to-mid 1980s Chile suffered from a severe economic crisis. Although real wages did not change significantly during this time period, the problem for many of Chile's poorer citizens was the drastic slashing of public spending that took place during this economic crisis. (Arensburg, pp. 28-29) The poorer families — in particular, the poorer households headed by women — were unable to make up for the losses that occurred because of the cuts in welfare and social spending.

During the early 1970s under Salvador Allende and his Popular Unity Program, many poorer Chileans were able to attain higher standards of living due to several social welfare programs. For example, poor children were given nutritional supplements to ensure a healthy childhood. Education became something that was available to all members of society, not just the upper class members. (Chavkin, p. 167) Inexpensive public housing was also made available to the poor. However, under Pinochet, things were different. A highly selective welfare system was implemented. Only the extremely poor received welfare benefits from the government. (Montecinos, 1994, p. 163) Moreover, these programs for the extremely
poor did not provide adequate compensation for the profound negative impact that the economic policies had on income redistribution. (Montecinos, 1994, p. 166) Fernando Zumbado, Director for Latin America and the Caribbean with the United Nations Development Program, explains that “the market does not distribute wealth, nor eliminate poverty, and it does not harmonize with the environment." ("Poverty Reduction...") The market may contribute to high economic growth; but if the wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, the overall benefits to the country are severely limited.

As the economic crisis continued to plague the Chilean economy throughout the 1980s, the economic situation grew much worse, especially for women. As unemployment rose, many husbands left their wives in order to look for work or because of increased tensions in the home due to financial concerns. Many women were suddenly forced to sustain a household on one income instead of on two incomes. In addition, government assistance was no longer readily available. Concerns such as health care and education were pushed to the side as many women struggled just to keep their families alive. Under the military regime education became “a commodity available in varying quantity and quality according to one’s purchasing power." (Collins and Lear, p. 24) A poor woman’s one chance to work herself and her family out of poverty, an education, was destroyed due to the fact that education became more of a luxury. Little girls who were needed at home could not go to school.

In her article, "Rural Women and the Neo-Liberal Model in Chile," Maria Soledad Lago claims that “the application of the neo-liberal model in agriculture and the partial undoing of the agrarian reform have largely impoverished the peasantry and enlarged the sector of landless, seasonal wage laborers." (Lago, p. 24) The poor are clearly not benefiting from this model, and in some cases they are losing the land that they used for their own subsistence. Perhaps if there were some sort of government subsidy program that allowed the smaller farmers to compete, the problem would not exist.

The agricultural industry is another example of the negative effects of Pinochet's reforms. As previously stated, this industry employs a significant number of women in the labor intensive sector of the industry. (Valenzuela, p. 163) A disadvantage for women in the agricultural industry is the migratory nature of the work force. The work force changes from season to season. This makes it easy for landowners to employ people illegally and pay them substandard wages. In addition, there is no overall authority that ensures health and safety standards.

Despite the fact that the military regime’s economic model paid little to no attention to the needs of Chilean women, Pinochet did recognize that it was imperative that he have the support of Chilean women; and he did in fact envisage a very limited role for women in his regime. Because he promised women representation in his government, he created a National Secretariat for Women. The purpose of the National Secretariat for Women, however, was not to provide a strong voice for the women’s movement in the government. Its purpose rather was to promote a return to a more traditional image of the family and the role of the female within the family. It merely institutionalized the regime’s vision of a return to past times.

The achievements of the National Secretariat for Women, such as women's centers and increased community involvement, reflect this vision. The focus of the government was not to provide women with skills that would help them participate in the economy but rather to increase their domestic skills. For example, many women joined handicraft workshops. Women were given materials and foodstuffs for joining these organizations. Handicraft workshops allowed women to earn a small supplementary income by allowing them to sell their crafts in the informal economy. (Schild, pp. 62-63) However, these workshops did not teach women any new skills that would give them a better opportunity to succeed in the labor force.

**Beyond Pinochet: Chilean Women in the 1990s**

If the Pinochet regime has ended, why do all of these problems continue to exist? In the early 1990s Chile certainly underwent a process
of re-democratization. In order to gain a reasonable and accurate assessment of the success of re-democratization in Chile, it is necessary to look at the long-term effects. When one examines the political parties, the women's movement and the Catholic Church, one can begin to see that Chilean women have made significant progress relative to other Latin American women. Yet, there is still a long road ahead. 

The main problem in the political sphere is that the process of re-democratization was not accompanied by any profound changes in the acceptance of women in the political institutions. Yet, slowly but surely change is beginning to occur. Women are starting to have a more active role in politics. In many smaller communities, women are running local governments. Several of the parties are beginning to provide opportunities for women within the party structure, but this is only the beginning of the battle for the women. For example, the PPD, Partido por la Demócracia, recently passed new party rules regarding the issue of gender. No more than 60 percent of the candidates running in a particular election may be male or female. But other parties have not followed suit. The male-dominated political parties not only must provide women with a place in the party system, but they must listen to them once they are there. However, as women across the social spectrum become more educated and play an increasingly important role in the workplace, parties will begin to understand that their voices must be heard if the parties are going to survive.

According to Fanny Pollarolo, another issue in the political sphere is that of “autonomous feminists.” (Pollarolo) Women candidates are often elected to a particular post by female voters who expect that they will pursue women's interests in the government. The voters assume that because they are female they will automatically concentrate their political career on women's issues. Often, however, this is not the case. Once women are in office, they do not focus their attention on women's issues, but rather on issues that will gain them national respect and recognition within the party. Personal goals take over. Supporting women's issues just does not earn a woman a position of power within the party structure because other issues are given higher priority within the institutions themselves as well as within the country as a whole.

Another problem that women politicians experience is that they do not represent a united front. The profound socio-economic differences that exist within Chilean society deeply divide the electorate. Poor women feel absolutely no connection to the wealthy educated women that are supposedly representing them in the government. This is a problem that is not easily overcome.

Under the military regime, the women's movement seemed to achieve a large support base. Women from all levels of society were pulling together for the good of the nation. After the fall of the Pinochet regime, the women's movement seemed to lose much of its energy, resulting in a significant loss of its support base. Women retreated to their homes in an attempt to pull their families back together. As a consequence, the future of the women's movement is not very clear. The main obstacle to a more powerful movement is the political party system. Each party has its own separate agenda; yet women leaders are all lumped together as leaders of the women's movement merely because they are female. Unfortunately, these women do not all share the same political beliefs. Consequently, the women's movement has not found much success in creating a unified political agenda. The issue of affirmative action is a perfect example. In this case, affirmative action is often associated with creating special rules that allow for increased representation of women in the labor force and political institutions. Each party has its own particular opinion regarding the merits of affirmative action. Traditionally the leaders of the women's movement have been the women involved in politics. However, given the diverse beliefs of the current female political leaders, there really has not been a successful attempt at creating a concrete agenda for the women's movement. At this point, if the women's movement is going to gain further momentum, it is up to those women currently involved in politics to sit down and create a common agenda with common goals and policies. A complete make-over of the women's movement is needed if it is ever going to become powerful in Chile.

However, this is not to say that Chile's
women have always been divided. Under the Pinochet regime, the Catholic Church encouraged women to take a very active role in the return of democracy. In light of the political crisis that was taking place, the Church became less concerned with issues of personal morality. There were larger issues at stake. Consequently, there was less of a focus on the traditional role of women in the household. The times required women to briefly step out of this role for the good of the nation and, more importantly, for the good of their own families. Now that democracy has returned to the nation, the Church has not encouraged continued involvement of women in politics and the labor force. The traditional image of the family is again seen as a way of bringing stability back to the country, and the Church views the mother as an integral part of this traditional family. Her role in the political world has diminished in the eyes of the Church due to a focus on the strengthening of the family and a revival of more traditional values.

Conclusion

As time has demonstrated, the Pinochet regime and the neo-liberal economic model did little to improve the quality of life for Chile's poor women. The military regime did, however, bring many women together to fight for the common cause of democracy. These women recognized, though, that the dissolution of the dictatorship was not going to significantly change their lifestyles. They needed more than a return to democracy. A change in the structures of the entire political and economic systems was necessary. Chilean women certainly have taken several steps forward since the end of the dictatorship, such as increased activity in the labor force and increased educational opportunities; but there are many complicated issues that remain. There are major political obstacles and women are still struggling for equal treatment in the labor market. The economic and political rights of women from all socio-economic levels need to be considered. The integration of women into the political system is not enough. Their voices not only need to be heard, but they need to be accepted as equals. Finally, the future of the women's movement is in need of dedicated and very strong women who are not afraid to be heard. Unity is its key to future success.
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