

UNSKILLED LABORERS IN LAHORE: NAVIGATING INFLATION'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex interplay of social and economic challenges faced by unskilled workers in a society characterized by persistent inflation over the last four to five years. Their socioeconomic hardships are intertwined with rising inflation rates, leading to a complex web of social problems. Using a qualitative research approach, we conducted 15 in-depth interviews with unskilled daily wage workers in the construction materials industry, including construction supervisors (Mistry), laborers (mazdoor), painters, and loaders. These interviews were conducted in Lahore, Pakistan, around Korey station on Walton Road. The findings of the study shed light on the multifaceted reality faced by unskilled daily wage workers who not only face socioeconomic challenges but also face significant health-related challenges. They also face barriers to accessing government-provided benefits, including the Insaf Sehat Card (a health subsidy program) and the Atta (wheat) Free Program, designed for deserving individuals. To effectively address these problems, it is imperative to establish robust and well-monitored mechanisms managed by dedicated government departments focused on the welfare and development of the poor.

Keywords: Unskilled Workers, Socioeconomic Challenges, Inflation, Government Initiatives, income

INTRODUCTION

In the field of economics, inflation is a pervasive and central factor affecting financial conditions worldwide. The pursuit of positive economic growth remains a central tenet in the quest for sustainable development. Inflation-driven fluctuations in product prices require close monitoring and timely analysis of monetary policy, often making policy decisions fraught with uncertainty (Tran, 2018). Reliable estimation of inflation rates is of paramount importance in the field of monetary policy. Diverse indicators, including daily stock market prices, currency valuations, interest rates, wage levels, and more, are closely examined to

understand and manage the multiple consequences of different levels of inflation (Bonaparte, 2022).

The inherent instability of currency values over time is particularly pronounced in financially weaker, underdeveloped countries. This instability affects various sectors, with construction being one of the most affected. Inflation leads to changes in project budgets, often resulting in incomplete projects. Escalating costs of construction materials have a cascading effect that necessitates adjustments in wages and heavy machinery prices, ultimately resulting in certain projects being completed at significantly

higher costs - a predicament faced by numerous construction companies (Sell, 2022). Labor plays a central role in the construction sector as it contributes physical energy to the production process. Their efforts transform raw materials into tangible products and make the construction of buildings, roads, bridges, and infrastructure a feasible reality (Musarat et al., 2021).

In the Pakistani context, day laborers encompass a diverse range of occupations, including housing construction workers, loaders in busy markets, painters, and those who work in agricultural fields growing crops such as potatoes and wheat. These workers are essential for various daily, wage-earning tasks (Marinakakis, 1997). Typically, workers begin their workday early in the morning and position themselves along roads and traffic signs to wait for potential work opportunities. Individuals seeking workers for construction and other tasks contact these workers at these locations. Negotiations often occur to discuss working conditions, including hours of work, rates of pay, and the payout process after the work is completed (Hyclak & Ohn, 1997).

In certain locations, lengthy discussions occur between those seeking workers for their projects and the workers themselves. Among the workers stationed along the main roads and at other strategic points, there is a significant contingent of mistry (construction supervisors) and mazdoor (laborers) whose work is essential in various construction projects, including housing and large-scale buildings (Islam & Guha, 2020). It is important to emphasize that the construction of houses and high-rise buildings would be unthinkable without the contribution of mistry and mazdoor workers. In addition to mistry and mazdoor, day laborers include painters, loader drivers, and laborers who specialize in tasks such as breaking up soil with drills, which is important for laying underground pipes for water and gas supply (Cha, 2015). Workers also perform excavation work along green areas on roads to facilitate the installation of underground utility networks for various companies.

It is worth noting that workers' daily wages vary depending on the type of work and the time required to perform it (Havranek et al., 2020). For mistry work, which is characterized by its

complexity and specificity, daily wages range from 1500 to 2000. In contrast, Mazdoor work is usually paid 800 to 1000. Painters receive payment upon completion of their work, which is usually between 1000 and 1500. This applies to both brush painting and spray gun painting, with different painters specializing in each method (Mocan & Unel, 2017).

Unskilled workers face a variety of common challenges, chief among which is the lack of health insurance and social security coverage in the event of a work-related death. The lack of health facilities exacerbates their situation when they become ill, leaving them unable to support themselves through work (Buch & Niebuhr, 2018). This precarious financial situation often leads to impoverished living conditions for the working class, as their daily earnings are low and they usually have no formal education, leaving them with limited alternatives to make ends meet without income. Laborers' work is also seasonal and its value fluctuates throughout the year (Noor & Shaker, 2017). Adverse weather conditions, such as the rainy season and winter, affect worker productivity. During the rainy season, construction work becomes difficult due to weakened adhesion of bricks and cement caused by moisture. Similarly, the shorter daylight hours in winter limit the opportunities for laborers to work (Marchán et al., 2017).

It can be observed that a large proportion of workers congregate at traffic signals and other strategic locations, relying on chance to find employment and earn a living once the work is completed. Most workers tend to be of advanced age, and their daily wages are primarily used to meet essential household expenses, including electricity bills and rent for their housing (Shaheen et al., 2019).

In October 2019, one person recounted an experience in which she hired a handyman to tile the facade of her house. After assigning the maestro the task, a conversation ensued between the maestro and a mazdoor who had been working on the project. In this conversation, the mazdoor told them that due to the considerable distance of their rural residence from the city, they slept on roadside green spaces, underscoring the fact that some of the workers were from rural

areas (S & Kulal, 2022). The demographic landscape of Pakistan includes a significant portion of the population engaged in low-income occupations, particularly day laborers who fall into the category of unskilled laborers. These people face a daunting challenge in meeting their expenses, as their earnings are generally modest, often in the range of a few hundred to nearly two thousand currency units (Sun et al., 2020). The compensation they receive for their work does not reflect the value of their work, resulting in a mismatch between the value of their contributions and the compensation they receive.

Significance:

This study examines the historical career of unskilled workers, spanning from past eras to the present, in which they predominantly occupy the role of day laborers. The study attempts to shed light on the various roles and responsibilities of unskilled workers and the complexities of their employment. It also examines the motivations that lead individuals to pursue careers as day laborers. The focus of this study is an assessment of the socioeconomic challenges faced by unskilled workers, particularly in the context of inflation. It examines how inflationary dynamics affect the availability of job opportunities for these workers, who often wait on the side of the road for a job offer. In this context, compensation practices are examined, where wages are paid after tasks are completed (Díaz et al., 2020).

In addition, the extent to which day laborers have benefited from government assistance programs, including the Benazir Income Support Program and the distribution of financial assistance in the form of cash, such as the Atta Program, to those in need, will be examined. It also examines the extent to which the Sehat Insaf Card is used by unskilled workers. In addition, the study addresses the perspectives of day laborers on the various challenges posed by inflation, including its impact on their health. It also examines the health problems prevalent in this population. Also of interest is how inflation can lead to conflict between day laborers and their families. Finally, possible policies and steps that the government should take to ensure the sustainable development and welfare of unskilled workers in

the future are explored (Yasuda & Immigrants, 2022).

Purpose of the study:

This study looks at the sociological aspects of unskilled workers and examines the factors that lead them to employment as day laborers. It examines the basic needs of day laborers and the impact of inflation on their financial stability, with particular attention to the impact on their relationships with family members. The study also examines the unique challenges faced by unskilled workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the prevalence of associated health problems. In addition, the study seeks to provide insight into the views of unskilled workers regarding future government initiatives for their development and well-being. It also seeks to uncover the diversity of hourly work tasks performed by unskilled workers in order to highlight the multi-faceted nature of their employment experiences.

Research questions:

1. What are the prevailing socioeconomic challenges experienced by unskilled workers amidst periods of inflation?
2. Which key factors and determinants can mitigate the adverse effects of inflation on unskilled workers?
3. In what ways does inflation contribute to domestic conflicts and tensions within the households of unskilled workers and their family members?

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Oil palm plantations employ unskilled labor in various capacities, such as inspectors, cleaners, drivers, and harvesters. There are an estimated 66,312 people employed in Malaysian oil palm plantations performing various tasks in this industry. The survey used an instrument that was modified and approved for implementation. The Likert scale was used to collect data, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) to evaluate different aspects (Arifin et al., 2021). Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulation techniques. For the study, all managers

of oil palm plantations were contacted by email to allow voluntary participation in the study. In smaller groups, respondents completed questionnaires during their working hours and then handed them over to enumerators (Park & Yangho, 2021).

The study sample size was determined based on the response rate, which yielded 347 responses from 403 estimated participants, an 86 percent response rate. This study highlights the importance of identifying and understanding the motivational factors that influence workers engaged in oil palm plantations. According to the Korean Standard Classification of Occupations, individuals working in elementary occupations are classified as unskilled workers. This classification covers about 1 out of 9 occupational groups. In this context, unskilled workers are characterized by their minimal skill requirements, which classify their role as elementary, and generally do not have occupation-specific training (Dessy & Rambeloma, 2012). These individuals have a basic level of physical stamina that enables them to perform a range of simple tasks in areas such as mining, security, food preparation, fishing, agriculture, and construction sites (Albattah et al., 2019).

In 2018, unskilled labor accounted for 11.5% of the total wage labor force in Korea. In Korea, individuals who leave their primary occupation often move into elementary occupations, especially if they are 50 years and older (Biddle & Cohen, 2022). Unskilled workers are characterized by manual labor, long hours of work, often 8 to 10 hours per day, limited formal or primary education, modest income levels, and increased exposure to occupational hazards with potential long-term consequences, including mental health problems. Some see this category of work, characterized by income-based employment, as posing an increased risk to life and well-being (Odondo, 2021).

Other studies suggest that unskilled workers are at increased risk of developing depression, which is associated with an increased risk of suicide. This risk is particularly pronounced among part-time workers, who experience similar mental health problems to their day labor counterparts.

This vulnerability to mental health problems also extends to an increased propensity for violent outbursts and an increased risk for bipolar disorder among day laborers (McPhee, 2012). Another body of research highlights that unskilled workers, especially laborers, are predominantly men and face health problems due to a lack of awareness and occupational health and safety measures during their work (Batina, 2017). Existing research on workers' mental health often uses two prominent models: the effort-reward imbalance model and the demand management model. Despite technological advances and changes in industrial processes, the safety concerns of unskilled workers continue unabated (Ma & Bassino, 2015).

In Iraq's Kurdistan Region, a significant portion of the labor workforce 52 percent-is informally employed, with a substantial number of workers receiving a daily wage. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on refugee households, where day labor is widespread. Mobility restrictions, lockdowns, and preventive measures have affected employment opportunities for these households, making it necessary to examine the consequences for refugee households that rely heavily on day labor during the COVID-19 era. A qualitative approach was adopted for this study, supported by IMPACT initiatives and funding from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The study aims to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on day labor and the socioeconomic status of refugees, using evidence from the Kurdistan Region since March 2020 (Agarwal, 2021).

Using a qualitative research methodology, IMPACT employed semi-structured data collection methods and reviewed secondary data to engage with 73 households in the Kurdistan Region. These households consisted mainly of refugees who earned their income through daily wage labor. Of the participants, 53 were male and 20 were female (Saikia, 2021). For household-level data collection, key informant interviews were conducted from December 16-23, 2020. IMPACT call centers in Duhok and Erbil supported this data collection process. Eligibility for key informant interviews was determined

through a brief selection interview conducted by the IMPACT team between December 15 and 17, 2020 (Agarwal, 2021).

Participants' responses were recorded using the KoBo toolbox. The study found an increase in the number of day laborers after March 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected their income, ability to work, and ability of their households to meet basic needs. These challenges were reported from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Rajashekhara, 2022). To meet these basic needs, working people resorted to various coping mechanisms, often using their savings to cover household expenses. As participants in this study emphasized, daily wage labor was the primary means of providing for the household. For those seeking to transition from informal to formal employment, challenges such as insufficient capital for investment and lack of skills are prominent. Surprisingly, individuals engaged in sectors other than daily wage labor have faced even greater challenges since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (UNHCR, 2021).

In today's labor landscape, there is a burgeoning online labor market that presents unique challenges to hiring. Traditional methods of contracting coexist with online platforms that offer short-term job opportunities. Local labor markets were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent closures, with crises lasting from week to week and month to month (Titus Lalith Antony et al., 2020). In a comprehensive three-month case study conducted at OP Jindal Global University's Centre of New Economics Studies, the research team documented the stories of 200-day laborers randomly selected in Mazdoor Mandis in Pune and Lucknow, India. These workers often struggle to secure even two days of work per week (Wage & State, 2021).

With the advent of technology, numerous websites have emerged to facilitate the hiring of day laborers for specific tasks. These platforms allow for direct communication and wage negotiations through verbal conversations. Examples include workindia.com, bookmybai.com, and helper4u.in. The trend of hiring freelancers for short-term tasks on massive online platforms is rapidly gaining traction

because it offers cost savings and quick accessibility (Kristen et al., 2020). Chilton's research suggests that day laborers spend a similar amount on task selection as workers do on task completion. A survey was conducted to better understand workers' preferences for platform tasks at the micro level. Difallah developed a system in which workers interact virtually through social networks and match worker preferences with available tasks (Banjari & Sahu, 2022). In competitive markets, professionals differentiate themselves based on their skills, confidence gained from experience and proficiency. Consumers select services based on their preferences by searching profiles to find an appropriate match (Barford et al., 2022).

Unskilled workers work in the low-wage sector on an hourly basis, where the value of their time is not reflected proportionally in their wages. Because a significant number of individuals work on a daily wage basis, the prevalence of poverty is closely associated with sole wage earners in households that engage in marginal, part-time, or temporary work at the individual level (Debjani & Faculty, 2022). In this context, factors affecting day laborers are more pronounced and can be attributed to differences in household composition, wage structures, and work patterns.

Theoretical framework:

Heckscher-Ohlin-Samuelson (HOS) model:

This economic model emphasizes the dynamic nature of international trade, in which countries engage in the exchange, production, and export of goods, using a variety of factors of production. Importantly, this model assumes that countries tend to export goods that rely heavily on unskilled labor while importing highly technological goods and those that require skilled labor (H, 2020). Consequently, this trade mechanism implies an increased demand for unskilled labor and a simultaneous decrease in demand for skilled labor. It is important to note that this model works under certain assumptions, including the assumption of highly competitive labor markets, which do not always match real-world conditions.

METHODOLOGY:

This study uses a qualitative research methodology to explore the experiences of unskilled workers engaged in daily wage labor. These include roles such as mistry (construction supervisor), mazdoor (laborer), painter, and loader, as they are referred to locally in the context of the study. A total of 15 interviews were conducted to obtain detailed insights from these day laborers, with data collection facilitated by a semi-structured interview guide. Each worker participated in one-on-one interviews, and the sample included individuals working on the side of the road as well as those seeking work under trees. Interviews took place at the Korey stop on Walton Road in the Lahore district. The data collected was transcribed and then subjected to thematic analysis for comprehensive data analysis and interpretation.

RESULTS:

Theme 1: Inflation and basic needs

Participants unanimously emphasized that their basic needs revolve around essentials such as food, cooking oil, flour, sugar, tea, and ingredients for preparing meals. One participant highlighted the importance of education as a basic need, as it can prevent their children from becoming laborers. Another emphasized the importance of housing, citing rising rents as a major problem, as it is difficult for them to afford housing with their current income.

In today's time of inflation, participants have difficulty paying electricity bills, especially after the 20th of the month when funds are limited. Inflation is a major contributing factor to their inability to afford these basic needs as their wages cannot keep up with increasing expenses. The availability of work was seen by some participants as a solution to these problems. In addition, participants expressed several specific basic needs, including milk for their children, access to gas for cooking, and even cigarettes, albeit at high prices. Meeting these basic needs has become increasingly difficult over the past two years due to inflation.

Another participant emphasized the need for accessible health care and education, especially free education for the children of unskilled

workers. Access to health care was seen as critical to a healthier life. Among the views expressed by unskilled workers, the desire for affordable food was the overarching theme, along with access to education and health care. Education was seen as a path to better employment opportunities, reducing the need for daily labor. Physical stamina was also cited as a challenge, as demanding work makes it difficult to meet basic needs.

It was noted that large numbers of unskilled laborers congregate along the main roads in search of work. This high supply of labor, combined with controlled prices for construction materials and limited demand for labor in government sectors, has contributed to stagnant daily wages. The government's ability to increase daily wages is limited due to taxation and additional taxes in other sectors, such as the cement industry. As a result, day laborers' wages have not increased significantly, according to government officials.

Theme 2: Impact of the economic crisis on personal relationships

Deep personal problems often arise in the households of unskilled workers when they go home without having earned a single rupee. Verbal altercations often occur between these day laborers and their family members. Some participants reported physical violence, admitting to mistreating their children, or conflicts with their spouses. For some, economic crises extended to divorce, with wives leaving the family due to prolonged unemployment of two to three weeks. Participants reported instances of economic violence, with family members using derogatory language and insults when they learned they had no income on any given day. Participants reported feeling disrespected and even evicted from their homes. Unskilled workers often described not returning home until they found work and earned money. Contributing financially to the household gave them a sense of happiness and respect.

In some cases, frustration at not earning enough led to violent outbursts, including physical abuse of their spouse. There have also been reported cases of drug addiction among unskilled workers, some of whom resorted to substance abuse to

cope with the stress of financial instability. This resulted in a diminished ability to think clearly and rationally. In addition, early marriages lasting less than 20 years are a common social phenomenon among unskilled workers. These households usually have three to four children, and in some as many as six. Large families struggling with economic crises often rely on a sole breadwinner. To ensure their children's well-being, parents consider the provision of essential nutrients, including vitamins and supplements, critical to their children's cognitive and mental development in the early years of life. The long-term effects of such nutritional support become apparent when these children reach adolescence and adulthood.

Theme 3: Health issues

Unskilled workers face a variety of health problems resulting from the difficult nature of their work. These health problems span a wide spectrum, including muscle weakness, bronchitis, persistent cough, tuberculosis, lung disease, kidney failure, urinary tract infections, infertility, chest pain, hair loss, skin disease, and cardiovascular disease. One participant reported a significant deterioration in vision, and another reported a severe injury in which he severed his fingers while operating machinery, requiring immediate medical attention. Hygiene practices among unskilled workers were generally suboptimal, and many failed to wash their hands before meals. Some even shared food with others, biting off the same portion without wearing mouthguards or gloves during construction. They usually made use of a cloth to cover their heads and noses, which provided limited protection. Interviews with these workers often took place near a ganda-nala, or sewer, where they spent long hours from dawn to dusk. Despite the unpleasant odor and potential health risks associated with this location, they downplayed its importance.

The physical toll of their work was evident in the participants' accounts. The tedious work, especially the manual transportation of heavy materials such as bricks, often took its toll. Carrying 8 to 10 bricks from the first floor to the third or fourth floor and then handling large quantities of materials in iron equipment made

them sweat. In the hot seasons, standing in the fresh air for even a minute caused physical and mental imbalance, so that they sometimes had to lie down abruptly. The use of equipment such as grinders or axes to break through constructed floors or roofs generated large amounts of dust particles that posed a significant respiratory health hazard. Inhalation of these particles can lead to various diseases. Loading the broken construction material onto trucks and carts also generated a lot of dust, resulting in dangerous working conditions.

Theme 4: Relief provided to unskilled workers by the government.

Many unskilled workers expressed frustration at not receiving financial assistance during difficult times, including during the COVID-19 era. They reported that they had applied for various assistance programs such as cash assistance, free atta (flour), and the Benazir Income Support Program, but came up empty-handed. Some also applied for the Sehat Insaf card but had not yet received word from the government regarding their applications. One participant reported long lines of unskilled workers at the distribution of free rashan (food) bags, especially during Ramadan. However, distribution often seemed to be haphazard, with some individuals receiving assistance while others went empty-handed. Participants felt that government initiatives existed on paper but were not effectively implemented. They felt that initiatives should go beyond providing food and include direct financial support. Programs such as Ashsas, Koi Buka Na Soia, and the Sayilani Foundation were cited as examples of organizations that offered free food but did not provide comprehensive support.

The issue of preferential treatment in various areas of life, including government assistance, was a common concern among participants. Many felt that certain groups were favored over others through biased behavior. The government income support program was mentioned, with participants being asked to text their Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) number to 8171 to verify eligibility. While most participants had attempted this, few received a confirmation message, raising doubts about the

transparency and effectiveness of the process. Interestingly, the interviews also revealed a technological divide among unskilled workers. While most owned a basic cell phone with limited functionality that lacked touch screens and advanced features, a small number owned smartphones with more features. This discrepancy in access to technology highlights the inequalities within the unskilled worker group.

Theme 5: Plan for unskilled workers

Participants had in common a desire for more stable employment, with many preferring steady employment to day labor. They emphasized the need for sustainable solutions to make a living. Several proposals emerged from their discussions:

1. housing society: participants advocated for the development of a housing society for unskilled workers. This housing association would provide safe and affordable housing, addressing the problem of housing insecurity faced by many of this population.
2. Free education and technical training: Participants stressed the importance of providing free education and technical training to all unskilled workers. This initiative would equip them with valuable skills and increase their employability in various sectors.
3. industrial training: they proposed the establishment of an industrial or vocational training center that could provide unskilled workers with the necessary skills and knowledge for future employment opportunities. Such training centers would bridge the gap between their existing skills and industry requirements.
4. Quotas in organizations: Participants called for quotas in both public and private organizations, including multinational corporations, to reserve a certain number of positions for unskilled workers. They emphasized the need for legal and policy frameworks to ensure equitable representation and employment opportunities for this group.
5. safety precautions: Safety precautions were also highlighted. Participants recommended strict adherence to safety protocols, including mandatory use of safety equipment and signing of agreements between worksite owners and those

responsible for construction. This would increase workplace safety for unskilled workers.

Overall, participants felt that the implementation of these measures could contribute significantly to the development and improvement of the living conditions of unskilled workers. They emphasized the transformative potential of such initiatives and saw them as a way to transform their developing country into a developed one.

DISCUSSION:

This study addresses the pervasive impact of inflation on the lives of unskilled workers and encompasses a spectrum of challenges that include physical, economic, and social dimensions across historical eras. Unskilled workers who find themselves in our social fabric represent a vulnerable and underserved population. This phenomenon is not uniform across the globe, but primarily affects developing and less developed countries, while in developed countries the number of unskilled workers is declining due to the transition to higher skills and adherence to Western minimum wage standards (Turnovsky & Wang, 2022).

The transformation of unskilled workers into skilled workers is achieved through targeted skills upgrading initiatives that include structured training and real-world experience (Sekar et al., 2022). This trend underscores the adaptability of labor markets to changing socioeconomic dynamics. In this context, our research underscores that unskilled workers are feeling the effects of inflation the most, exacerbating their pre-existing socioeconomic problems along with the escalation of inflation rates.

CONCLUSION:

This study attempts to describe the multiple challenges faced by unskilled laborers, locally referred to as "day laborers," along with "mistry" and "mazdoor" in the sociocultural framework of the Pakistani context. These people face several social and economic problems primarily due to the prevailing inflation. It is noteworthy that inflation in Pakistan has experienced an alarming increase of more than five times in the last four to five years, resulting in widespread adversities

that affect various aspects of people's lives, from their domestic circumstances to their employment prospects. Interestingly, the effects of inflation go beyond the economic sphere and encroach on the social fabric, resulting in domestic violence. The availability of financial resources plays a central role in this context, with the uneven distribution of these resources creating an atmosphere of inequality and competition. Such inequalities, coupled with unequal decision-making powers, fuel discord that culminates in interpersonal conflict and, unfortunately, loss of life.

Addressing these complex problems requires the establishment of a carefully designed mechanism. This mechanism should be carefully crafted and rigorously enforced to address the multi-faceted challenges, which include both social and financial dimensions. It is imperative that such a mechanism be used to mitigate the adverse effects of inflation, promote equitable distribution of resources, and help strengthen social harmony and stability.

Author's contribution

AF contributed to the introduction, significance, purpose of the study and research questions. MA led the literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion. AF edited the professional English services of manuscript.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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