

# Unmasking the GBV ghost in refugee settlements

An Analysis Of Sexual Gender Based Violence Among South Sudan  
Refugee Girls And Women In Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement



## 2019 REPORT





# Acknowledgement

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We thank God for the sufficient grace.

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A close-up photograph of a woman with dark skin and curly hair, appearing to be in a state of distress or crying. She is covering her face with her right hand, with her fingers spread. She is wearing a red lanyard with a badge around her neck. The background is dark and out of focus.

**4,487 of the 5001 GBV cases reported in 2017 (90%) were females, meaning GBV affects more females than males**





## 1.1 Introduction

This is a research report on sexual violence as a form of Gender Based Violence among South Sudan refugee girls and women in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement. It was conducted with support from the TuWezeshe Social Action Grant under the TuWezeshe Akina Dada project run by Akina Mama wa Afrika.

The Social Action Grant is awarded to Fellows who have completed the TuWezeshe leadership training for young feminist leaders. The £500 grant was awarded to Janet Namayengo, a 2018 TuWezeshe Fellow, for the project “Unmasking the GBV ghost in refugee settlements.”

The research was conducted in April 2019 under Namayengo’s umbrella organisation, Education & Development Opportunity – Uganda (EDOU). At EDOU, Namayengo is a Project Officer in charge of girls’ empowerment. The project leveraged on the power of storytelling to document the impact of sexual gender based violence (SGBV) among South Sudan refugee girls and women in Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement.

Bidi Bidi is located in Yumbe district, West Nile, at the Uganda-South Sudan border. It is one of the biggest refugee settlements for South Sudan refugees in Uganda. The total refugee population in the settlement was 286,859 refugees (30 June 2018, Office of the Prime Minister). With the population of 584,221 (February, 2018) and 286,859 refugees, Yumbe District has 49% population as refugees (UNHCR, June 2018).



## 1.2 Background

The Republic of South Sudan gained independence on 9 July 2011, which ended decades of armed conflict and union with the Republic of the Sudan. However political turmoil perpetuated by two political players: President Salva Kiir and his former vice president turned-rebel leader, Riek Machar would soon plunge the country into a civil war in 2013 barely two years after the country gained independence.

Since December 2013, armed conflict in the Republic of South Sudan has claimed thousands of lives and driven nearly four million people from their homes (UNHCR, 2017). While many remain displaced inside the country, more than two million have fled to neighbouring countries in a desperate bid to reach safety. As at February 28, 2019, Uganda hosted 801,555 South Sudan refugees, majority of whom living in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement.

## 1.3 A history of hosting refugees in Uganda

Uganda has had a long history of hosting people fleeing upheavals in their countries. In the 1930s and early 1940s, the country hosted in Nyabyeya, Kojja, and Arapai refugee camps European and Arab refugees displaced by World War II, including Italian prisoners of war who were housed in Entebbe.

Prompted by the influx of Sudanese refugees in 1950, the colonial administration enacted the Control of Refugees from Sudan Ordinance in 1951. This was soon followed by The Control of Alien Refugees Act, 1960, to cater for all refugees regardless of where they came from.

On September 27, 1976, Uganda ratified the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol of the Convention guaranteeing the rights of refugees and asylum seekers enshrined in the International Human Rights Conventions. Uganda has since hosted refugees from Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia among other countries.

#### 1.4 Refugee rights protection instruments

SGBV is often rife in crisis and fragile settings. However, there are a number of both local and international instruments that protect the rights of refugees from SGBV and all forms of violence. Refugee rights in Uganda are guaranteed by various national, regional and international legal frameworks.

Uganda's Refugees Act (2006) stipulates that refugees are entitled to equal enjoyment and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in economic, social, cultural, civil or any other fields as provided for in the Constitution and other relevant laws in Uganda.

At the international level, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); the New York Declaration (2016), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) are among the legal instruments that protect the rights of refugees.

**"Uganda's Refugees Act (2006) stipulates that refugees are entitled to equal enjoyment and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms."**

## 2.0 RESEARCH RATIONALE, GOAL, OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

SGBV is one of the vices affecting girls and women in refugee settlements yet oftentimes goes unreported and not documented. The overall goal of the study therefore was to make an analysis of SGBV among South Sudan refugee girls and women in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement.

The project had two major objectives:

- Contribute to building of knowledge on SGBV among refugees.
- Enhance interpretation of the problem and the underlying causes and impact to provoke and inform national, regional and international processes for effective interventions.

The primary target group for the study were South Sudan refugee women and girls aged 10-65 who fled their homes as a result of civil war and moved to Uganda and now settled in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement.

This project leveraged on the power of storytelling through real-life stories of survivors to document the impact of SGBV on refugee girls and women in Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement.

**The following methods were applied:**

- In-depth interview with refugee women and girls, boys and men
- Focus Group Discussion with refugee women
- Interviewed officials of humanitarian agencies and local NGOs working in the settlement
- Carried out secondary research involving review of reports and internet desk research

**“The primary target group for the study were South Sudan refugee women and girls aged 10-65 who fled their homes as a result of civil war”**



### 3.1 Gender Based Violence among refugees in Uganda

In its 2017 report on GBV, UNHCR stated that 5001 new GBV incidents were identified, managed, documented and reported from 12 refugee settlements in Uganda. The key GBV contributing factors included power imbalance in relationships, scarcity of food, alcoholism, denial of resources (e.g. food, household items, money), harmful traditional practices such as forced marriages, changing gender roles that leave men idle or feeling disempowered, limited access to post-primary schools and livelihood opportunities prompting and poverty that increases vulnerability to sexual and other forms of exploitation and abuse, covering long distances to fetch firewood and grass for thatching huts.

The most prevalent cases were physical assault (1,640 or 33%) followed by psychological/emotional abuse (1,210 or 24%), rape (1,035 or 21%), denial of resources (551 or 11%), sexual assault (308 or 6%) and 257 or 5%) were forced marriage (UNHCR, 2017). 4,487 of the 5001 GBV cases reported in 2017 (90%) were among females, meaning GBV affects more females than males.



## 3.2 Forms of Sexual violence against girls and women

SGBV is a highly gendered problem, and in fragile and humanitarian settings such as refugee settlements, the magnitude is even higher. Rape, defilement and marital rape were noted as the leading forms of SGBV among South Sudan refugees in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement.

The major causes of SGBV among refugee girls and women in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement include gender inequalities and power-imbalances in homes, separation of spouses as result of the civil war, alcoholism, cultural norms and practices causing some women to be treated as sex machines by their husbands, and growth in townships.

**These causes are illustrated in cases 1 to 3 below.**

### Case 1 – Drunk and raped

“My house is located near a discotheque. You may sleep in the house and think all children are in the house yet they sneak out and go to the discotheque to dance. Girls as young as eight years walk at night, and that’s when men find and rape them. Recently, one girl was raped when she was drunk and later dumped near my house. She didn’t know who raped her or realise she was raped until she sobered,”  
Mary Dudu, 43,

### Case 2 – Pregnant by unknown men

“Women have no other source of livelihood so resort to brewing and selling alcohol, but that is becoming problematic. They sell alcohol up to late in the night. Some get drunk and end up being raped by their customers or other men who take advantage of them. Many end up getting pregnant for men they do not know,”  
Anna Gimu, 28  
Secretary Women’s Affairs, Block 5.

### Case 3 – Sexually abused by her husband

“There is a man in my community whose sexual urge is unimaginable, it is actually violent. The man wants to have sex with his wife very time, anywhere whether at the well, in the trading centre, everywhere.

The wife is really tortured. She is very thin and I think it’s because of such sexual violence from her husband. Maybe the man is mentally ill; we don’t know,”  
Mary Dudu, 43  
Women leader, Block 4

## 3.3 Impact of SGBV among refugee women and girls

The impact of SGBV among refugee women and girls ranged from physical abuse to emotional and psychological torture, and spread of HIV/AIDS. The cases documented are horrifying: A woman was raped after giving birth, an elderly blind physically disabled woman was taken advantage of and raped. Other women contemplated committing suicide. Cases 4 to were documented through in-depth interviews and illustrate the extent of SGBV and its impact among South Sudan refugee girls and women in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement.



#### Case 4 – Traumatized, almost committed suicide

“My journey from South Sudan in August 2016 was dreadful. I was moving in a group of three persons, two men and I. We fell into the soldiers’ ambush. The two men were killed. They were slaughtered using a knife. The soldiers do it openly, they fear nothing. They said if I made noise, they would slaughter me too. Fear gripped me. The soldiers commanded me to return home. When I got home, my mother, sisters and I decided to flee in the direction of Uganda. There were many cases of violence I witnessed with my own eyes. Many women were raped and others killed. The soldiers either rape or kill you. Yet even rape is no guarantee to being spared. My cousin sister was killed. Her death was horrible. She was heavy pregnant. They raped and then cut her belly open and removed the baby. They put the baby on her chest and both mother and baby were left to die. By the time I got here, I was so traumatized. I almost ran mad. I used to get nightmares and run weirdly in the night. I almost committed suicide,”  
Rosemary Amana.

#### Case 5 – Raped by husband after giving birth

“In 2016, heavily pregnant, I fled the civil war in South Sudan. My husband belonged to one of the fighting groups so he escorted me to the border. He did not continue with the journey into Uganda but returned to South Sudan, to fight. In Uganda, I was relocated to a refugee settlement in Adjumani. I was assured I would deliver my baby at a health centre. Later, my husband came. He complained that I was getting too comfortable in the settlement and that Ugandan men would snatch me away from him. He went back. The next time he returned, he came with his gun, entered the settlement, and commanded me to follow him to a lodge. I had been allocated a shelter with other refugees. He demanded to have sex with me. I told him that I was not ready, since I had just given birth. He did not listen but forced me to have sex rapidly until I was totally shattered. I felt so degraded and scared at the same time yet I could not tell anyone. In our culture a woman cannot say no to a man. It took me weeks of agony before I got a social worker to confide in. At that point, life was totally meaningless; I wanted to commit suicide,”  
Anna Lakong

# STOP SEXUAL GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

#### Case 6 – Blind and raped

“I fled my village of Moli when fighting in the area became unbearable. I walked on foot in the bushes on my way to Uganda. After many days of walking, I got on the main road and that’s where I saw a vehicle moving in the direction of Uganda. I am old and sickly and at that time I was totally worn out. I also have problems with my sight. Because of old age, I do not see well. You can imagine the trials of an old blind refugee woman! This situation is exploited by some men who rape me. And because of poor sight, I am unable to recognise them,”  
Regina Adiyé

#### Case 7 – Disabled, blind and raped repeatedly

“I am disabled. I depend on food rations given to us by (humanitarian) organisations, which is never enough, so go without food some days. I sleep on a mat with nothing to cover myself. The walls of my house have holes as is the roof so when it rains, it rains on me. When the rain is too much, I just stand because everything on the floor get soaked in water. There is no door on my house (hut) so it is not possible to lock at night. Drunkard men come at night and rape me. I told my neighbours about my horrible experiences but they could not help me. I was told I should go and report the case but the complaint desk is three kilometres away; I am unable to walk that long distance,”  
Rose Candia.





## 3.4 Gender Based Violence Disguised

Focus Group Discussion unmasked forms of GBV that were committed and accepted by the community particularly men. They found various tactics of justifying their actions including glorifying their culture that purportedly ensures wives are 'disciplined' in the homes. Instead blamed laws in Uganda that protect the rights of women for causing women to be 'disobedient' to their husbands. SGBV seemed to be normalized by the South Sudan refugee community living in the settlement. Cases 8 and 9 illustrate these scenarios.

### Case 8 – The law protecting women's rights is the problem

"The Law in Uganda is the problem. In South Sudan, once you marry a wife, you tell her what she must understand. But here in Uganda, when you want to make her understand (read: beat), they take you to prison. The laws in Uganda increase violence in the camp (settlement),"

Moses Sadak, 32  
Resident of Block 4

### Case 9 – 'Our wives have grown horns'

"You see, when our wives come here (in Uganda), they grow horns. Some women left their husbands in South Sudan to get men here who can support them. When their husbands come and try to inquire why and how they get money for drinking or ask them about the rumours of moving out with other men, the women just rush to police and report violence from their husbands. It is not that the men are bad people; it is because these women have grown horns (become disobedient to their husbands),"

Rose Ponj, 23,  
Resident of Block 4.

## 3.5 Sexual violence against women devastates children

SGBV had devastating effects on children (Case 10). This is in addition to the documented cases of physical torture of children (parents confessed to torturing their children when they were deemed disobedient).

### Case 10 – Children see their mother's nakedness

"This man (in Case 3) doesn't really care whether the children are around or not, whether it is in the compound, at the well, in the trading centre; he wants to have sex with his wife. It is horrifying for the children."

Mary Dudu, 43  
Women leader, Block 4

Cases 11 and 12 show how child abuse was disguised as disciplining children. There was misinterpretation of the child rights protection laws to mean promoting indiscipline among children. In turn, some parents 'discipline' their children to prove that parents still have control over them. Humanitarian agencies were also accused of causing children to disrespect and disobey their parents and instead respect officials who give them welfare support.

**Case 11 – Nothing wrong with torturing disobedient children**

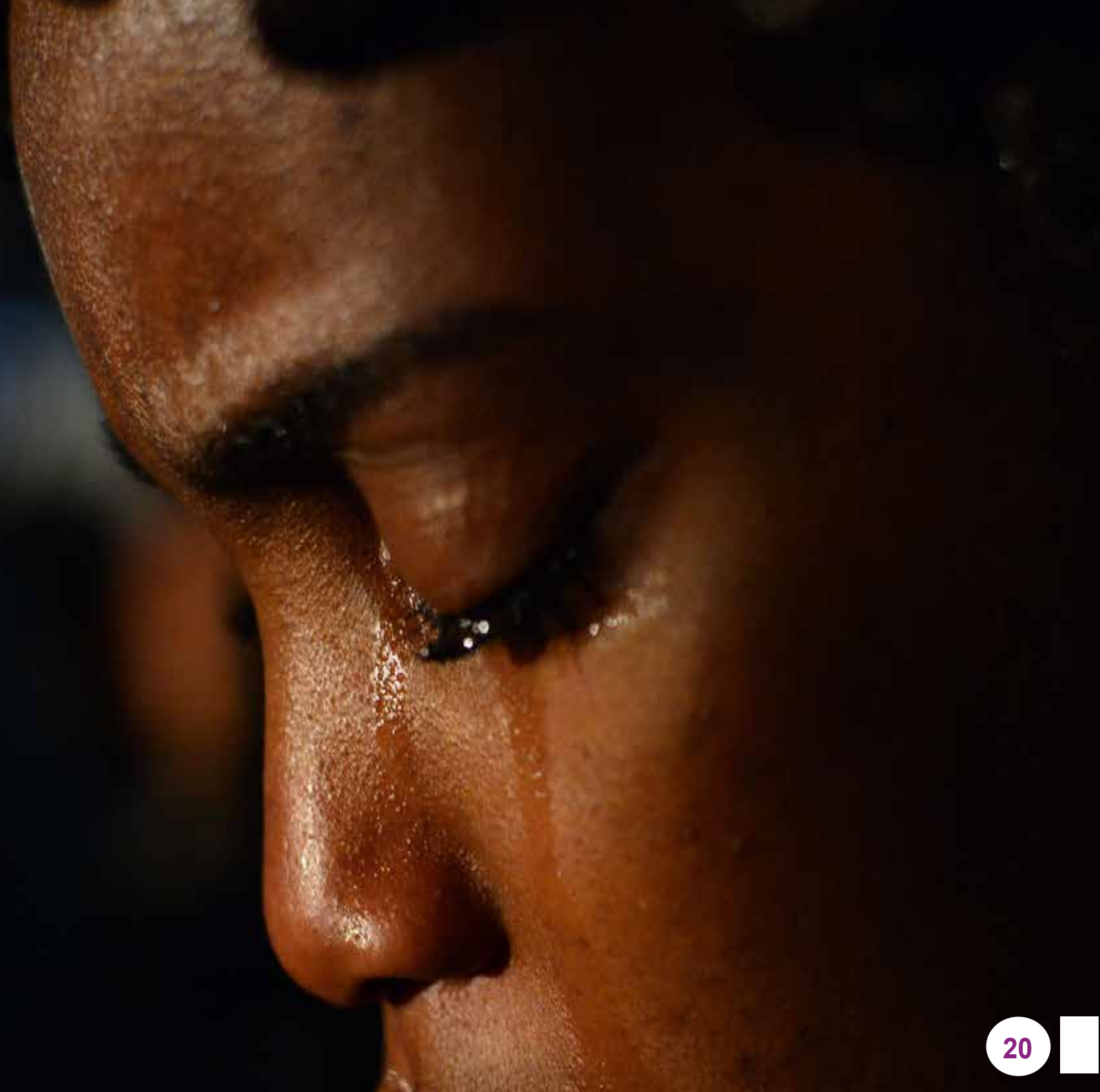
“If you pick a stick to beat a child, rights NGOs will come after you. It is therefore making it hard for parents to discipline their children. This is not good; in our culture, we believe in caning children thoroughly,”

Samuel Batali, 26

**Case 12 – ‘Children are becoming unruly because of rights’**

“Our children are supported by humanitarian organisations so the children no longer listen to us but officials from those organisations. The organisations teach the children rights so you find that even a small child will say that in Uganda, there is no child beating. They can go to discotheque and do not expect you to punish them. You send him to school and he goes the other way, and you cannot punish him. Others come from school and they do not want to do home chores but play because they have been taught it’s their right to play. You want to punish him, but they (authorities) will say that’s child abuse. This is the problem here in Uganda. Otherwise in South Sudan, if a child disobeys, you discipline him. But here in Uganda, because of rights, children are becoming unruly,”

Narcy Jama



## 4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Conclusion

Sexual violence as a form of Gender Based Violence among South Sudan refugee girls and women in Bidi bidi refugee settlement had devastating effects on the survivors. Women lost their dignity, became traumatized in addition to having physical injuries on their bodies. SGBV also horribly affected children. It remains one of the serious threats to the health and safety of South Sudan refugee girls and women.

### 4.2 Recommendations

1. Improve reporting systems for SGBV cases and strengthen individual case management systems including use of data, referral pathways and follow up of SGBV cases.
2. Improve SGBV prevention and response including early identification, access to health, security, justice (police and judiciary), and SGBV coordination forums at field level to jointly develop SGBV prevention strategies. This should include capacity building training for service providers.
3. Enhance SGBV prevention activities targeting intimate partners and adolescents in and out of school, single and vulnerable women, girls and elders.
4. Train journalists and other storytellers to improve reporting of SGBV cases and prevention.
5. Create safe environments for women and girls in the settlement. This should include access to water and energy as well as adequate lighting in off-grid areas.
6. Durable solutions should be seriously considered especially relocation of refugees to ease burden on Uganda.

7. Carry out a broader study of SGBV in all zones of Bidi Bidi and other refugee settlements in the country to further build knowledge on SGBV so as to improve evidence-based advocacy and programming.

8. In addition to documenting the causes and impact of SGBV among refugees, it is recommended that documentation of best practices for SGBV prevention be conducted to enhance effective programming by refugee serving organisations.

9. Train refugees and refugee communities in Uganda laws, women's rights and sexual and reproductive health. This will aid the understanding of key drivers of SGBV and appropriate remedies.

10. Provide psychosocial support and rehabilitation of SGBV survivors should be undertaken including provision of healthcare services.

11. Program for access to quality education and vocational training for girls including education for teenage mothers should be undertaken.

12. Increase financing of refugees and refugee community support services and particularly address gender financing disparities in humanitarian action. This is because in 2014, less than 1% of aid to fragile states targeted gender equality significantly.



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