



## **Women's representation in local government in Sri Lanka: a study on the new (local government) electoral system**

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### **Abstract**

The female population of Sri Lanka is 51.6%. Women are well represented in a variety of sectors, such as education, health, etc. Women's presence in political institutions is low, despite the fact that it is considerable in grassroot level political activities. In light of the rising female population, it is by no means adequate. To address this issue, Sri Lanka's local government entities now have a mixed election system and a 25% female quota system under the Local Government Election (Amendment) Act No. 01 of 2016 and No. 16 of 2017. It was first put into practice in the 2018 local elections. The goal of this study was to determine whether the aforementioned constitutional provisions have resulted in a numerical increase of 25% in the representation of women in local government, whether the quality of participation has increased as a result, and whether these provisions will result in the creation of a new, promising women's representation in the future national politics. It is important to examine whether the 25% women's representation quota system introduced by the aforementioned constitutional provision has grown numerically and whether the stated goals have been achieved in practice with regard to women's representation. For this study, both primary and secondary data were used. A questionnaire based on 60 selected delegates from 12 local governing bodies was used to gather primary data in the Kalutara district. Simple statistical techniques were used to analyze quantitative data and information, and descriptive techniques were used to analyze quantitative data and information. MS Excel program was used to analyze the primary data. New constitutional provisions have resulted in a numerical increase of 25% for women's representation in local government bodies. It evolved from elected officials. Although the number of women in leadership positions has increased, their qualitative participation has not. It is observed that the level of quality participation has been hampered. The development of a women's representation that can inspire fresh optimism for tomorrow's politics on the national level, is not at a satisfactory level. Therefore, the constitutional measures that were enacted to promote women's representation have not actually achieved their intended goals.

**Keywords:** local government, participation, quota system, representation, women

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## Introduction

In Sri Lanka, maternal and newborn mortality rates are extremely low, while literacy is high. Women constitute 51.6% of the Sri Lankan population (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2018). Women work in a variety of occupations and hold various levels of office, not just in the executive sector but also in other fields. They significantly contribute to the nation's development. Furthermore, in Sri Lanka, which has a democratic political system, political freedom and basic rights are guaranteed by the constitution without regard to gender (The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 1978). People enjoy universal suffrage and the right to be represented. However, women are underrepresented in politics. Women's representation has been less than 6% since independence and remains so today.

Political rights have been extended to women regardless of gender under Sri Lanka's 1978 Constitution. Women's political participation can be seen, particularly at the grassroots level, through activities like opinion-sharing, campaigning, and agitation. Women's political participation is increasing, as seen by their increasing involvement in agitations, politics, and opinions expressed at grassroot levels. However, the electoral representation of women increases slowly. Since the implementation of universal suffrage, women's electoral representation has not been adequately represented.

A Sri Lankan woman served as the first Prime Minister of the world. Two women served as Sri Lanka's Executive President and Prime Minister in 1994. Currently, women make up 51.6% of the population of Sri Lanka. 5.8% of women were represented in Sri Lanka's parliament in 2014. 1.9% of local government bodies are comprised of women (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 2019). The rate of women's representation throughout the 67 years from 1947 to 2014 increased by 2.8%. 94.6% of Sri Lankan women were literate as of 2012 (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2014). Therefore, it is not possible to be complacent about the women's representation in politics.

The Fourth World Conference on Women's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted in Beijing in 1995, states that every woman has the right to take part in political life in her own country. Transparent and responsible government empowers women. Women's autonomy is then, safeguarded. According to this Universal Declaration, democracy should be established regardless of gender, and women's social, economic, and political statuses should be enhanced (United Nations Population Fund, 1994).

Despite the fact that these arrangements have been established internationally, Sri Lanka has begun to follow a silent practice in terms of women's political rights. It was problematic that Sri Lankan women contribute slowly to political representation. As a result, the Sri Lankan government was eager to adopt legislation focusing on increasing women's representation.

The Government of Sri Lanka introduced a 25% female quota for local government bodies and a mixed electoral system for local government bodies through the Local Government Elections (Amendment) Act No. 01 of 2016 and the Local Government Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017. Under the constituency system, 60% of the members are elected by public vote, while the remaining 40% are elected by political parties. Each local government is required to have 25% female representation.

As a result, a political discourse around women's electoral representation has emerged in society at the moment. It is necessary to study whether there has been a significant improvement in the electoral participation of women in Sri Lankan society, or whether problematic situations have arisen in practice, after the implementation of the new constitutional provisions. The study examines if the constitutional provisions had any influence on increasing women's political engagement, whether women's representation has increased quantitatively and qualitatively, and what kind of challenges have arisen. The effect of implementation of Local Government Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017 on the number of female representatives participating in local government, the knowledge of the female representatives about the new election system, the quota system, and the anticipated goals, and whether the statutory measures imposed by the Local Government Elections (Amendment) Act No. 01 of 2016 and the Local Government Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017 achieved the desired aims related to female representation was investigated. The qualitative participation of female representatives in the local politics was determined based on participation in active politics, policymaking and national political system.

### **Research Methodology**

Data from both primary and secondary sources have been utilized in this study. The aims to see if the new quota system for women's representation in local government institutions has resulted in both a numeric and qualitative increase in the representation of women.

### **Data collection**

To explore these objectives, primary data were collected using the questionnaire method. The questionnaire method was used to evaluate the biological information, political information, and role of local government representatives, of 60 female members belonging to 05 political parties in 12 local government institutions in the Kalutara district.

04 municipal councils in Beruwala, Horana, Kalutara, and Panadura as well as 08 local councils are included from the Kalutara district: Panadura, Dodangoda, Horana, Kalutara, Madurawala, and Millaniya. Out of 80 female representatives, 60 were chosen for this sample to represent urban, semi-urban, rural, all ethnicities, all religions, and all political parties. It was not possible to contact the other 20 female representatives as they wish to remain silent.

Most of the participants in this sample are Sinhalese although Tamils and Muslims are also represented. The Beruwala Municipal Council is represented by the district's first and only Muslim female representative, whereas Bulathsinhala and Madurawala local councils are represented by Tamil female elected representatives. The sample included the female representative from the Madurawala local council.

Additionally, secondary data for this study was gathered from books, newspapers, the government's charter, laws, and the internet.

## Data analysis

Simple statistical approaches were used to analyze quantitative data and information, whereas descriptive methods were used to analyze qualitative data and information. MS Excel software was used to analyze the original data.

## Results

### Women representation in local government bodies under the new electoral system

The 2018 local government election was conducted using a mixed election system in accordance with the aforementioned new constitutional revisions. Table 1 shows the selection process of the female members chosen for the study. It appears that the majority of the female representatives have been elected as selected members. The number of elected female legislators shows that it has become difficult for women to campaign and win elections. Accordingly, the women's quota system for local government bodies has succeeded in achieving a 25% female representation. In some local government entities, just 21.12% of women's representation has been effectively achieved. Only 21.12% of women's representation has been practically completed in some local government bodies. Only 21.12% of women have been effectively represented in some local government entities. For instance, although there should be 05 women representatives in the Kalutara Municipal Council, only 04 women are now serving in that body.

Table 1: Number of representatives and how they were chosen for local government in 2018

Total number of members	Number of male representatives	Number of female representatives (25%)	Elected members		Selected members	
			(60%) Number of female representatives	Number of male representatives	(40%) Number of male representatives	Number of female representatives
346	266	80	178	23	88	57

Source: Sample survey data, 2019

This analysis shows that women's representation has increased under the new local government election system that was implemented in 2018.

### Demographic information

This study found that women between the ages of 61 and 75 had a larger representation than women between the ages of 18 and 30. The majority of female representation in local government organizations was between the ages of 31 and 60, with a rate of 78.3%.

All members in this sample have completed their school education. They are therefore, literate. 91.7% have passed a government-recognized exam, with the majority passing the G.C.E. (O/L) and 18.33% possess a higher education qualification.

### Political knowledge and political background

Through the use of the media, social media, and participation in political debates with friends and family, the majority of the female delegates appear to have an understanding of politics to some

extent. However, two-thirds of the female delegates had some kind of political experience, either by active participation in politics before the local government elections, involvement in rural or different unions or associations, employment as social workers, or by holding office in these organizations.

In this study, it was discovered that 71.7% of the women representatives with experience in active politics in this sample had family members involved in active politics, whereas the rest of the group had no political family background. Women representatives with active political experience came from male-dominated, and extended political families. The husbands of the women parliamentarians appear to be the most politically involved members of their families. 93.33% of them had run their election campaign with the assistance of the male members of the family such as the spouse, father, brother, brothers-in-law, and cousins.

It could be identified that the female representatives who engaged in active politics, on behalf of deceased fathers, brothers, and husbands, reflecting the characteristics of traditional electoral representation. The first and only Muslim representative in Kalutara district's local government bodies have also entered active politics as a widower.

### **Function of women as representatives of the local government**

Approximately 75% of the delegates engage with the people of that area whenever possible, with the remaining 25% meeting them exclusively on selected days. It was informed that due to the busy schedule, making a phone call before meeting with some representatives was more practical. Due to their busy schedules, some female representatives appear to spend a limited amount of time with people. However, it was evident that most of them attempted to contact the people by phone whenever available.

It was evident that 08.4% of the female representatives experienced financial difficulties. The monthly salary of a local government delegate is Rs.15,000/=. The Vice President's monthly allowance is Rs.20,000/=: and the Chairman's allowance is Rs.25,000/=. In addition, they are entitled to a telephone allowance. A certain political party's female representatives contribute their salaries to the party. An amount of Rs. 1,000/- was paid monthly to the party fund by representatives of many parties. As a result, no one appeared to be satisfied with the monthly stipend to which they were entitled. They point out that the modest income was not sufficient, as the monthly cost of living was high.

It appears that a majority of 41.7% of female representatives use their opportunity to speak on matters of public concern in the local government. It became evident that 06.7% commented on public matters only, when necessary, while 10.3% spoke frequently and 38.3% occasionally did so. 01.7% of respondents admitted to never making any sort of public comment. Certain lawmakers expressed their disappointment at the futile nature of speaking on public matters. They were dissatisfied as it was difficult to put their ideas into practice due to the way that the local government institutions operated. They lacked sufficient knowledge on technology, electronic media, and the law. Further, there were not enough resources allocated to them due to the interference of the chairman or other influential representatives. Since a majority of women representatives were chosen by the party without running for office, they were given less respect in the local government.

This survey found that 90% of the women representatives requested the help of a third party to help them make decisions about people's difficulties, while only 10% of the women representatives worked independently to make decisions about people's issues. It was revealed that husband, family, relatives, mayor, chairman, other male representatives, third-party organizer, old party members, constituency or provincial council members, and the party supported them.

This study also focused on the agreement reached by women representatives while deciding on issues affecting people. It was shown that 80% of the female representatives consult with other female representatives whenever necessary or always before making a decision about a public concern. However, it was evident that 20% of women representatives do not talk about difficulties with other women representatives. Even though, there was a high degree of agreement among the representatives of the same party, it was discovered that there is only occasionally a similar level of agreement with the representatives of the opposing parties. Considering the statistics presented above, it is apparent that the majority of female representatives work under the challenging circumstances.

*Table 2: The public issues identified by women representatives*

<b>Public issues</b>	<b>Number</b>
Family issues	6
Employment Issues	50
Housing issues	39
Borrowings	11
Common property issues	11
Garbage disposal issues	43
Road problems	37
Street lighting issues	35
Environmental issues	27
Cultivation related problems	9
Women & children's issues	17
Problems with drainage system	41
Problems in obtaining approval for construction	15
Others	13

\*One factor is represented by a sample of 60.

*Source: Sample survey data, 2019*

Table 2 shows that 11 concerns that are more prevalent for female public representatives in the local government organizations that were examined. 07 major issues could be identified. These included concerns with employment, garbage disposal, drainage systems, housing, roads, road lighting, and environment. 06 other issues have also been noted: Issues related to women and children, obtaining approvals and loans, concerns about common property, concerns about agriculture, and family troubles. In addition to this, 13 more issues were found. These include Samurdhi allowances, irregularities in library services, issues with the economy and cemeteries, issues with schools, problems with the landless, etc.

95% of the sample's representatives were sensitive to issues concerning women, and only 01.7% were unaware of them. 03.3% of respondents chose not to respond.



*Table 3: Women's issues identified at local government level*

<b>Women's issues</b>	<b>Number</b>
Unemployment	25
Self-employment opportunities	28
Difficulty in providing market for products	20
Establishing child day care centers	8
Preschools	14
Maternity & child clinics	20
Children's Park	7
Garbage disposal	25
Library	13
Houses	24
Credit facilities	31
Vocational training	23
Others	6

\*One factor is represented by a sample of 60.

*Source: Sample survey data, 2019*

Table 3 shows 13 issues faced by women in local government. 08 primary issues affecting women have been noted: lack of self-employment, unemployment, garbage disposal, homelessness, lack of access to credit facilities, lack of vocational training, absence of a market for finished goods, and absence of maternity and pediatric clinics. Several other sensitive problems have also been noted. For example, when mothers immigrate overseas for employment, drug addiction in their families increase. Violence against women, poverty of Muslim women, malnourishment of pregnant women, low levels of education among Muslim women are some of the problems identified. Further, failure to uphold the law and their rights, and the lack of amusements available for Muslim women are also noted.

The local government had provided funding to 30% of the women representatives in this sample to help them carry out the project, but the majority, 70%, had no financial support at all. Only 13.3% of female MPs who received financial assistance were satisfied with it. According to the data presented above, most of the representatives did not receive any financial support from the local government to carry out their projects. Those who received financial support are also dissatisfied with it.

30% of the representatives received between Rs.1,800,000/= to Rs.150,000/=. 83.3% of them have carried out road repair work by putting concrete or installing asphalt. The other representatives have worked to construct a drain, a culvert, a children's park, a stadium safety fence, a community hall, and a public well, and also to develop canals, repair a public cemetery, fix water and electricity difficulties, and support the needy. As the Millaniya Pradeshiya Sabha is a new local government, it was discovered that until the time of this research, it has not received adequate cash allocations for the necessary constructions, purchases, and projects.

*Table 4: Projects that the representatives have undertaken to carry out*

<b>Project to be implemented</b>	<b>Number</b>
Road development	22
Constructions of drains, culverts, sluices	12
Street lighting	5
Women's programs	2
Promotion of self-employment	9

Building constructions	9
Building repairs	6
Grants to societies	2
Development of infrastructure like water & electricity	8
Improving public hygiene	7
Others	28

\*One factor is represented by a sample of 60.

*Source: Sample survey data, 2019*

When looking at the projects that the representatives were expected to implement, Table 4 shows that a majority of them preferred road development projects. The construction and repair work on concrete and asphalt roads, drains, culverts, sluices, the installation of concrete coverings for drains on avenues, and other infrastructure projects fall under this category. They indicated a desire to improve infrastructure, including street lighting, water, and electricity, as well as to build and renovate of various kinds of buildings, including homes, boundary walls, and multipurpose buildings.

Although the delegates asserted that they were considerate of the welfare of women and children when identifying local requirements, they were unable to meet them. Given the information above, it is evident that the representatives give more priority to improve infrastructure when managing finances and looking at projects that are scheduled to be implemented.

This study found that 33.3% of respondents were happy with the public service they provided as a representative, while 01.7% were not happy at all. 65% of respondents emphasized that there are more services to be provided for the public.

In this sample, half of the representatives have political objectives for the future, while the other half appear to be functioning without such objectives. When questioned about the political prospects of the female members, 01 out 10 anticipated to run in the parliamentary, provincial council, and local government elections. That group expects to foster social, cultural, and economic advancement within its domain. The majority's future political goal was to bring forth a corruption-free, fraud-free, sustainable development, a good society, and a secure future for the people. Despite their passion for social work, they have not considered running in the next election. Because of the pressures of being a woman in the family, one-third have decided not to run in the next election. Some of the younger representatives were disappointed because of the institutional difficulties. As an illustration, the local government does not have a secure location where a newborn baby can be breast-fed while attending meetings. It was evident that some female representatives have decided to retire from active politics due to difficulties such as lack of funding from the local government for projects, inability to provide for the needs of the public due to inadequate funding, and lack of respect for women representatives. The difficulty of confronting the political climate as a woman, and economic hardships are also included.

Due to the women's quota system, numerous women representatives who ran for office in the 2018 local government election on their spouses' behalf decided to resign from politics, allowing their husbands to run for office.



## Discussion

### Number of women in local government bodies under the new election system

The study examined the women's representation at the local government level from 1966 to 2011 to see whether the 25% women's quota system boosted women's representation in provincial bodies. Table 5 shows women's presence at local government level from 1966 to 2011. Until 2011, it appears that female representation in local government entities was close to 02%. This demonstrates that women's representation has not increased in proportion to the growing female population.

*Table 5: Women's representation in local government level from 1966 to 2011*

Election of year	Female representations (%)
1966	1.5%
1970	2.1%
1979	2.5%
1982	1.5%
1991	1.7%
1997	1.9%
2006	1.8%
2008 - 2011	2.01%

*Source: (Wickramasinghe & Kodikara, 2020)*

It appears that the presence of women in local bodies has increased in comparison to previous years after the implementation of the 25% female quota system by the Local Government Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017. There is a need to increase the representation of women in local politics in relation to the expanding population.

### Quality of female participation

This election method, which was used for the first time, appears to have served as a learning experience not just for women, but also for political parties and the entire society. A majority of female representatives entered local politics in the 2018 elections. Therefore, 99% of the female representatives had no prior experience working for a local government entity. Some female lawmakers had no prior experience in active politics. Acting as an agent appears to be difficult because of this lack of experience. However, each representative has some knowledge of politics thanks to the media, social media, personal political conversations, etc. The fact that most women representatives received political expertise at grassroot level political and social activities prior to the election, appears to be beneficial to their political path.

A poll done by the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development in 2012 listed inadequate opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making in the governmental institutions as a difficulty. The importance of youth participation in progressive politics has been emphasized to achieve long-term human development. Involving youth in political decision-making is viewed as a long-term investment. It has been emphasized here that the young should be empowered and should participate in making effective and meaningful political decisions (United Nations Development Program, 2012).

Through the women's quota system, more women over 60 than under 30 entered politics in the sample. As a result, young women's opportunities to influence policy were constrained. Young

women's engagement in political institutions was limited, despite being creative, active, and efficient. Youth political participation is an investment in long-term progressive politics.

The political family background has made a significant contribution to running for office in 2018. The quota system had appointed a majority with a political, family background and a minority without a political family connection. Female representatives were chosen because of their political family history than their education or experience. Unfortunately, some female representatives with political mandates are robbed of future political ambitions because of their husband's inability to run for office due to the quota system. It appears that their efforts to give their husbands the opportunity in future elections have not met the stated aims of the constitutional requirements.

It is unfortunate that family politics including "widow" politics are active in both local and national government organizations. Thus, denying educated and intelligent women the opportunity to enter politics through the quota system, which is required for active politics, violates constitutional goals.

### **Contribution of female representatives in active politics and policy making**

In a male-dominated social system, the woman plays many roles, as a mother, wife, and housewife in the family unit. A woman's role in the family is significant. As a result, she finds full-time political involvement difficult. It is unfortunate that some female representatives wish to quit politics in the future owing to the challenges that comes with being active participants in both the home and politics.

Male members have greatly aided female representatives in entering politics, leading election campaigns, and strengthening their political paths. Supporting women in elections should be appreciated by the male members of the extended family. Support from men for women in a male-dominated area such as politics should be valued in a male-dominated culture. Though they seek the aid of a third party for their election campaign, the majority of female representatives did not continue to seek the assistance of external third parties for decision-making while functioning as a representative. Thus, the intrusion of third-party in local government operations undermines the public opinion and the constitutional aims. It is a characteristic of many women representatives in making decisions regarding people's concerns that they should discuss among themselves and, in certain situations, reach decisions.

Regularization, management, and administration of all things relating to public health, public utility services, public roads, public welfare, convenience and welfare, protection and promotion of all facilities, are defined in section 2(3) of the Local Councils Act No.15 of 1987, Functions associated with local government entities (Act of the Pradesh Sabha,1987). Therefore, credit facilities, employment, and family difficulties are outside the authority of statutory local authorities. In certain circumstances, women representatives can be seen functioning without a clear understanding of the responsibilities of local government agencies. The most critical problems should be selected while identifying problems. Popular topics should not be prioritized. Although the women representatives claimed to be sensitive to the requirements of women and children in identifying local needs, they were dissatisfied with the attention devoted to women's issues in action. While road and building maintenance and repair are major issues, other local

needs should also be considered. Examples include garbage collection, resolving issues affecting women and children.

The absence of appropriation and imbalance in the distribution of finances in local government operations have had a significant impact on women's representatives. Not being able to implement their projects appears to have frustrated them. Furthermore, because they were not the ones who ran for office and were elected, because they were elected to local government bodies through a quota system, the women representatives have been ignored and insulted by other members.

### **Contribution of female representation in national politics and future progress**

Female representatives are passionate about social service. However, a large number of female lawmakers have no active political aims. Because of a variety of factors such as a lack of political satisfaction, dissatisfaction, institutional obstacles, and social challenges. When certain female MPs decide to leave active politics, the intended goals of the constitutional provisions are called into question.

However, some female representatives deserve praise for actively participating in politics and formulating public policy despite obstacles. This quota system has the advantage of raising hopes for future national politics.

### **Conclusions**

This study found that the 25% female quota system enacted by Local Government Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017 enhanced women's representation in local government bodies. It has become difficult to conduct high-quality politics because older women's representation has taken precedence over that of young women, and because there are few opportunities for young women to participate in local governance and train future leaders for national politics. It has become a challenge to ensure quality politics. The political family background has played an important role in campaigning for the election in 2018. As a result, a majority of educated and bright women who do not come from political families, gave up the opportunity to enter politics. It is an obstacle to promote quality politics. Female "widow" politics has also become a source of concern for political quality. The lack of expertise in active politics, the lack of knowledge in the operation of local government institutions, and the fact that some female representatives have no political or social active experience at the grassroots level have hampered their ability to offer quality service. However, it appears that representatives with experience in active politics and social services are attempting to give great service while overcoming existing hurdles. Active women who are involved in social work and understand politics, will be able to excel in the future by opening the political doors.

Due to the insufficient monthly allowances from the local government entities, women representatives retire from full-time politics. It has become a challenge in offering quality service to the public. Furthermore, because of the duties that women are obliged to undertake within the family, they prefer to stay out of full-time politics. During the elections, the male members of the extended family support the women representatives to strengthen their political path. Seeking third-party support to carry out duties as a women representative has also become a challenge. As a result, the meddling of a third-party in the decision-making process, as well as the limited

ability to make direct judgement in the face of obstacles, pose a challenge to their position. The ability of female representatives to find a shared purpose through conversation on people's issues can improve the quality of politics.

In certain circumstances, there is a misunderstanding regarding the scope of the local government. Women's and children's issues are being addressed slowly. Prioritizing popular topics over the necessity of identifying local issues has undermined the quality of politics. However, a majority of the female lawmakers lack clear political goals. They are frustrated because of societal, institutional, and personal issues, political discontent, and a lack of experience. By concentrating on issues like providing adequate financial allocations from local authorities, giving proper recognition to women representatives, and providing more knowledge on pertinent subjects like information technology, law, and English language, they will experience some optimism and satisfaction regarding politics. It is feasible. The decision of a sizable number of female members to abandon local government authorities has cast doubt on new ambitions for tomorrow's national politics. However, despite the difficulties, we can have hope for the few female representatives in national politics. They receive positive backing from regional to national politicians.

For Sri Lankan politics, the 25% women's quota system is a necessary and a beneficial constitutional amendment. The local authorities have failed to provide quality results from the quota system because it is new to Sri Lankan politics. The primary cause of this is because political parties and women representatives both lack a thorough knowledge of the women's quota system. By understanding the goal of women's representation, young, energetic, active women engaged in politics, educated, and with active experience in politics or social welfare will be able to become efficient politicians through this quota system. Political parties have a significant role to play. Based on the previously given information, this research has validated the issue that, despite an increase in the participation of women in local government bodies due to the 25% female quota system imposed by the constitutional provisions, the quality has been challenged.

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