

## A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER DISPARITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

Muhammad Shoaib<sup>1</sup>, Shamraiz Iqbal<sup>2</sup>, Shamshad Rasool<sup>3</sup>, Farooq Abdullah<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>PhD Scholar, Department of Gender Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup>Lecturer, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Pakistan

<sup>4</sup>Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Mirpur University of Science & Technology, Mirpur, AJ&K, Pakistan

<sup>1</sup>shoibsoc@uog.edu.pk, <sup>2</sup>shamraiznatt@gmail.com, <sup>3</sup>shamshad.rasool@uog.edu.pk,

<sup>4</sup>farooq.abdullah@must.edu.pk

Corresponding Author: \*

Shamshad Rasool

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### ABSTRACT

This study is a comprehensive exploration of gender inequality in higher education in Pakistan from a sociological perspective. It investigates how social structures, cultural norms, and institutional practices shape unequal educational experiences and outcomes for males and females. Despite policy initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity, females in Pakistan continue to face barriers related to access, participation, and representation in higher education institutions. Using a qualitative content analysis of published research documents, the study synthesizes existing literature to identify the socio-cultural and institutional factors perpetuating these inequalities. The findings reveal that patriarchal values, gendered socialization, socio-economic disparities, and institutional biases collectively contribute to the persistence of gender inequality in higher education. The analysis, grounded in sociological theories particularly structural functionalism, conflict theory, feminist theory, symbolic interactionism, and Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital highlights how education reflects and reproduces broader gendered power relations in society. The study concludes that meaningful progress toward gender equity requires transformative change at both institutional and societal levels, including gender-sensitive policies, inclusive pedagogical practices, and the redefinition of women's roles in education and society. This study's role in informing policy and academic understanding, and promoting social change towards gender equity, is significant and should not be overlooked.

**Keywords:** Gender Inequality, Higher Education, Feminist Theory, Cultural Capital, Gender Equity, Sociological Analysis

### INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality in higher education remains a persistent and complex issue across many societies, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan (Shoaib & Zaman, 2025). However, education, and especially higher education, is not just a problem but also a potential solution (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025c). It is widely recognized as a transformative force that fosters social

mobility, empowerment, and national development (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). Despite significant progress in female enrollment and educational reforms over recent decades, gender disparities in access, participation, and representation persist in Pakistan's higher education system (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). These inequalities are not merely the result of individual choices or

economic limitations but are deeply rooted in sociocultural norms, patriarchal structures, and institutional dynamics that reproduce gender hierarchies within the educational sphere (Shoab, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). From a sociological perspective, understanding gender inequality in higher education requires exploring how social institutions, family, culture, religion, and the education system itself interact to shape gendered opportunities and constraints (Shoab, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). The socialization process in Pakistan often reinforces traditional gender roles that prioritize men's access to education and employment, limiting women's roles to domestic and reproductive domains (Shoab & Ullah, 2025). Consequently, females' educational participation is influenced by societal expectations, family pressures, safety concerns, and economic dependence (Shoab, Tariq, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025). Moreover, structural barriers such as unequal resource allocation, limited female faculty representation, a lack of supportive campus environments, and gender bias in curricula further deepen educational inequities (Shoab, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025b).

The sociological analysis of gender inequality also highlights how class, region, and urban-rural divides intersect with gender to produce varying patterns of educational access and achievement (Shoab, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025a). For instance, girls from rural areas or lower socioeconomic backgrounds face compounded disadvantages compared to those from urban or affluent families (Shoab, Shamsheer, & Iqbal, 2025). These disparities reflect broader social inequalities that extend beyond education into employment, decision-making, and social empowerment (Muhamamd Shoab, Amina Shamsheer, & Shamraiz Iqbal, 2025). Therefore, the higher education system in Pakistan becomes a site where larger societal inequalities are mirrored, negotiated, and sometimes contested (Shoab, Rasool, Zaman, & Ahmed, 2025). This study, grounded in sociological theory, aims to unpack the social mechanisms and institutional practices that sustain gender inequality within Pakistan's higher education landscape. It seeks to analyze how power relations, cultural ideologies, and social structures influence gendered

experiences of students and faculty. By applying sociological frameworks such as structural functionalism, conflict theory, and feminist sociology, the study endeavors to provide a nuanced understanding of the persistence of gender disparities and their implications for social change. Finally, a sociological perspective on gender inequality in higher education is not only essential for diagnosing the roots of the problem but also for guiding transformative policies and practices that promote gender equity and inclusive educational development in Pakistan. Through this lens, higher education is reimagined as a space for empowerment, critical consciousness, and social transformation rather than a site of reproduction of existing gender hierarchies.

### Study Context

Despite notable progress in expanding access to higher education in Pakistan, gender inequality continues to be a significant social and educational challenge (Shoab, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). Females remain underrepresented in higher education institutions, particularly in leadership positions, research roles, and fields traditionally dominated by men (Shoab, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025c). However, policy frameworks and national commitments emphasize gender equality and female empowerment (Shoab, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a). However, deep-rooted sociocultural norms, patriarchal attitudes, and institutional biases continue to restrict females' educational participation, performance, and advancement (Shoab, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025b). This persistent disparity is not merely a matter of unequal access but reflects broader structural and cultural factors embedded within Pakistani society (Shoab, Rasool, Kalsoom, & Ali, 2025). Traditional gender roles often dictate educational choices and career trajectories, discouraging females from pursuing higher education or limiting their autonomy within academic spaces (Shoab, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Moreover, issues such as a lack of female role models, inadequate safety measures, gender-insensitive institutional environments, and limited policy implementation exacerbate the inequality

(Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025). From a sociological standpoint, the problem of gender inequality in higher education in Pakistan represents the intersection of social structure, cultural ideology, and institutional practices that collectively sustain gender hierarchies (Shoaib, Kausar, Ali, & Abdullah, 2025). The absence of a critical sociological analysis of these underlying mechanisms limits the effectiveness of existing policy interventions (Shoaib, Iqbal, & Iftikhar, 2025). Therefore, there is a pressing need to examine gender inequality through a sociological lens to understand how social norms, power relations, and institutional dynamics shape and perpetuate unequal educational outcomes for males and females. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive sociological analysis of gender inequality in higher education in Pakistan, identifying its root causes, and proposing insights for creating more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

### Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to analyze gender inequality in higher education in Pakistan from a sociological perspective. It focuses on understanding how social structures, cultural norms, and institutional practices contribute to the persistence of gender disparities in access, participation, and representation within the higher education sector.

Specifically, the study aims to:

- Examine the sociocultural and institutional factors that influence gendered educational opportunities and outcomes.
- Explore how patriarchal values, social expectations, and class dynamics shape females' experiences in higher education.
- Assess the role of higher education institutions in reproducing or challenging gender inequalities.

Provide sociological insights and policy recommendations to promote gender equity and inclusivity in Pakistan's higher education system.

### Research Questions

- What are the urgent sociocultural factors contributing to gender inequality in higher education in Pakistan that demand our immediate attention?
- How do deeply ingrained social norms, family structures, and cultural expectations significantly influence females' access to and participation in higher education?
- In what ways do institutional practices and policies within higher education perpetuate or challenge gender disparities?
- How do class, region, and socioeconomic background intersect with gender to shape educational opportunities and outcomes for students in Pakistan?
- What insights do sociological theories provide for understanding and addressing gender inequality in the context of higher education in Pakistan?
- Urgency of Policy and Institutional Measures

### The Data and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore gender inequality in higher education in Pakistan from a sociological perspective. The focus is on understanding how social structures, cultural norms, and institutional practices shape gendered experiences and outcomes within the higher education system. The study relies on secondary data drawn from published research documents, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, doctoral theses, and relevant academic publications. These documents have been selected from reputable databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and HEC Pakistan Digital Library. The inclusion criteria focus on studies published within the last two decades that specifically address issues of gender inequality, female participation, and sociological aspects of higher education in Pakistan.

A purposive sampling method is used to select documents that provide rich, contextually relevant, and empirically grounded insights into the research topic. The selected studies represent diverse perspectives, institutional settings, and theoretical orientations within the field of sociology of education and gender studies. The collected documents are analyzed

using qualitative content analysis. This approach involves systematically identifying, coding, and categorizing recurring themes, patterns, and meanings related to gender inequality in higher education. Through an interpretive process, the analysis aims to uncover how gender relations are constructed, maintained, and contested within educational discourse and practice. Themes such as access, representation, institutional bias, sociocultural barriers, and policy responses are explored in depth.

### Limitations

As the study relies exclusively on secondary data, it may be limited by the scope, focus, and methodological diversity of existing research. The findings, therefore, reflect interpretive insights based on existing literature rather than primary field data. However, this method provides a comprehensive sociological understanding of gender inequality within the Pakistani higher education context by synthesizing multiple research perspectives.

### Results and Discussion

The qualitative content analysis of published research documents reveals that gender inequality in higher education in Pakistan is a multidimensional issue deeply embedded in sociocultural, economic, and institutional structures. The findings demonstrate that, despite notable policy advancements and increased female enrollment rates over the past two decades, substantial inequalities persist in terms of access, participation, academic achievement, and leadership representation. These disparities are perpetuated by the interplay of patriarchal values, socioeconomic constraints, and institutional biases that collectively reproduce gender hierarchies within higher education.

#### Socio-cultural Constraints and Patriarchal Structures

A recurring theme across the analyzed studies is the dominance of patriarchal ideology in shaping educational opportunities for females (Shoaib, Batool, Kausar, & Abdullah, 2025). Pakistani society, grounded in traditional gender norms, often associates females' roles with domestic responsibilities, marriage, and

family honor (Shoaib & Bashir, 2025). As a result, many families prioritize male education, considering female higher education as secondary or conditional upon social approval (Shoaib, Ali, & Kausar, 2025). In rural and semi-urban contexts, these patriarchal norms are particularly pronounced, where families restrict females' mobility due to safety concerns or perceived moral risks (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Studies further reveal that familial expectations, rather than personal aspirations, influence females' educational choices (Shoaib, Ahmed, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). Even when females pursue higher education, they often select fields deemed "appropriate" for females, such as education, social sciences, or health sciences, while being underrepresented in disciplines like engineering, business, and technology (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025b). This gendered segregation of academic disciplines reflects broader societal beliefs about men's and women's capabilities and social roles, ultimately reinforcing occupational inequalities in the labor market (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025a).

#### Institutional Barriers and Gendered Campus Environments

Higher education institutions in Pakistan, though legally open to both genders, frequently exhibit institutionalized gender bias in their structures, practices, and environments (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). The analysis highlights issues such as inadequate gender-sensitive infrastructure, limited mentorship opportunities, and the underrepresentation of females in decision-making positions (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025). The absence of female faculty in senior academic and administrative roles deprives young females of role models and support networks essential for academic growth (Shoaib, 2025a). In many universities, the institutional culture remains male-dominated, where gender discrimination, subtle biases, and even harassment discourage females from full participation in academic and extracurricular activities (Shoaib, 2025b). Moreover, policy implementation on gender equity often remains weak or symbolic (Ali, Shoaib, & Kausar, 2025). However, gender

equity policies exist on paper; their translation into practice is hindered by bureaucratic inertia, lack of monitoring mechanisms, and insufficient institutional commitment (Ahmed, Shoaib, & Zaman, 2025).

### **Socio-economic Inequality and Regional Disparities**

Another critical finding concerns the intersection of gender with class and regional inequality (Shoaib, Zaman, & Abbas, 2024). Females from low-income families or rural areas face greater educational barriers due to financial constraints, limited access to quality institutions, and poor infrastructure (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024b). Urban-rural disparities are evident not only in access but also in the quality of higher education received (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024a). Urban females have better access to universities, scholarship opportunities, and social mobility, whereas rural females often confront restricted choices due to geographic isolation and sociocultural conservatism (Shoaib, Ali, & Abbas, 2024). The socio-economic divide amplifies the gender gap (Shoaib, 2024e). Wealthier families can afford private or foreign education for their daughters, whereas poorer households withdraw girls from school to reduce financial burdens (Shoaib, 2024d). Consequently, educational inequality reflects broader structural inequalities within Pakistani society, where gender, class, and geography intersect to shape educational trajectories (Shoaib, 2024b).

### **Policy Gaps and the Limitations of Gender Mainstreaming**

Despite government initiatives such as the Higher Education Commission's (HEC) gender equity programs and scholarship schemes for females, studies reveal a disconnect between policy formulation and on-ground implementation (Shoaib, 2024c). Gender mainstreaming remains more of an administrative requirement than a transformative agenda (Shoaib, 2024a). The absence of gender audits, lack of institutional accountability, and minimal stakeholder participation weaken the impact of these policies (Ali, Zaman, & Shoaib, 2024). Furthermore, gender equality initiatives often

overlook the sociological dimensions of inequality, focusing narrowly on numerical representation (e.g., female enrollment rates) without addressing the underlying cultural and institutional factors that perpetuate bias (Shoaib, Usmani, & Abdullah, 2023). Without transforming the power relations within educational institutions and challenging patriarchal mindsets, policy interventions remain superficial and unsustainable (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2023).

### **Theoretical Interpretation: A Sociological Lens**

From a sociological perspective, the findings are understood through multiple theoretical frameworks:

- Structural functionalism explains how traditional gender roles are maintained through educational institutions that socialize individuals into socially accepted norms, thus reproducing gendered expectations and inequalities.
- Conflict Theory interprets higher education as a site of struggle where dominant groups (men, elites) maintain power and privilege by controlling access to knowledge, resources, and leadership opportunities.
- Feminist Theory provides a critical lens for understanding how patriarchy operates as a system of domination, shaping both institutional structures and individual experiences. Feminist scholars argue that true gender equality requires not only access but also the transformation of institutional culture to ensure women's empowerment and autonomy.

These theoretical perspectives collectively illustrate that gender inequality in higher education is not simply an educational issue but a socially constructed phenomenon reflecting power relations within society.

### **Toward Gender Equity and Inclusive Education**

The discussion across the analyzed literature emphasizes that achieving gender equality in higher education requires holistic, multi-level interventions (Shoaib, Rasool, Anwar, & Ali, 2023). It involves not only improving access

but also transforming institutional cultures, curricula, and policies (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2023). Universities must adopt gender-sensitive governance, strengthen support systems for female students and faculty, and institutionalize mechanisms for addressing discrimination and harassment (Shoaib, 2023b). Moreover, educational reforms should engage families, communities, and media to challenge the stereotypes that confine women's roles and ambitions (Shoaib, 2023a). Empowering females in higher education is essential for Pakistan's broader social and economic development, as educated females contribute significantly to workforce participation, leadership, and intergenerational progress (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2022). The results underscore that gender inequality in higher education in Pakistan is a product of intertwined social, cultural, and institutional dynamics (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021a). Addressing it requires not only policy reform but also a sociological transformation in how gender roles, educational values, and institutional structures are perceived and practiced (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021b). A sociological perspective, therefore, provides a deeper understanding of these issues and serves as a foundation for meaningful change toward a more equitable and inclusive higher education system in Pakistan (Shoaib, 2021).

### **Theoretical Insights**

Understanding gender inequality in higher education requires a comprehensive theoretical framework that goes beyond surface-level explanations of unequal access or representation. A sociological perspective enables the analysis of how gendered power relations, social institutions, and cultural ideologies shape educational opportunities and experiences. This theoretical review draws upon major sociological traditions, including structural functionalism, conflict theory, feminist theory, symbolic interactionism, and Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, to illuminate the complex nature of gender inequality in Pakistan's higher education system.

### **Structural Functionalism: The Reproduction of Traditional Roles**

Structural functionalism views society as a system of interrelated parts that work together to maintain stability and social order (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993). From this perspective, education functions as a mechanism for socialization, transmitting cultural values, skills, and norms that sustain the social structure (Hughes & Lambert, 1984). However, this same process also reinforces traditional gender roles. In Pakistan, structural functionalist analysis reveals that educational institutions often serve to legitimize and reproduce gendered divisions of labor. Females are socialized into nurturing and service-oriented roles through curricula and social expectations; however, males are encouraged toward leadership and technical fields. The persistence of gendered subject choices, such as females' dominance in education, arts, and humanities, and men's presence in engineering and technology, reflects this structural reproduction (King, 2011). Thus, functionalism helps explain how educational systems contribute to social stability by maintaining traditional gender norms, even at the cost of equity. However, the limitation of structural functionalism lies in its conservative orientation; it tends to justify existing inequalities as necessary for social balance rather than as products of unequal power relations. Therefore, to fully understand gender inequality in higher education, more critical perspectives are required (Wienclaw, 2011).

### **Conflict Theory: Education as a Site of Power and Inequality**

Conflict theory, rooted in the works of Karl Marx and later extended by neo-Marxist thinkers, views society as a battleground of competing interests and unequal power relations (Collins, 1971). Education, from this standpoint, is not a neutral institution but a means through which dominant groups maintain control and perpetuate inequality (Simon, 2016). Applying conflict theory to the Pakistani higher education context highlights how patriarchal and class-based power structures influence educational opportunities. Males, as the dominant group, hold greater

access to resources, institutional authority, and decision-making power; however, females remain marginalized. This inequality is perpetuated through policies, institutional practices, and social expectations that favor male advancement (Ferrare & Phillippo, 2023). For example, men's overrepresentation in leadership positions and academic administration reflects the unequal distribution of symbolic and material capital. Education becomes a tool for reproducing gender and class hierarchies rather than challenging them. The conflict perspective thus exposes the systemic nature of inequality, emphasizing that educational disparities are rooted in structural power imbalances rather than individual limitations, and the crucial need for cultural change to address these disparities.

### **Feminist Theory: Challenging Patriarchy and Gendered Knowledge**

Feminist theory provides the most direct lens for understanding gender inequality in education, as it critically examines how patriarchy shapes institutions, ideologies, and experiences (Collins, 2004). Feminist scholars argue that education both reflects and reproduces patriarchal values, marginalizing women's voices, experiences, and contributions (Harding, 2004). In Pakistan's context, feminist theory helps explain how patriarchal cultural norms restrict females' educational mobility and participation. Concepts such as gender socialization, intersectionality, and epistemic injustice are central to understanding these dynamics (Code, 2018). Educational institutions often operate under androcentric knowledge systems, where curricula and classroom practices are biased toward male perspectives (Bennett, 2006). For instance, history textbooks may focus more on male figures and their achievements, while literature classes may predominantly feature works by male authors (Gunew, 2013). This bias in the curriculum can lead to a lack of representation and recognition for female experiences and contributions, leading to symbolic marginalization within the learning environment. Furthermore, intersectional feminism deepens this analysis by recognizing

that gender inequality interacts with class, region, ethnicity, and religion (Pereira, 2012). A rural woman from a low-income background, for instance, faces different and often more severe educational barriers than an urban, middle-class woman. Thus, feminist theory highlights the multiplicity and complexity of oppression, making it indispensable for sociological inquiry into gender inequality in higher education (Grosz, 1987).

### **Symbolic Interactionism: Gender Construction in Everyday Educational Practices**

Macro-level theories focus on structural inequalities, and symbolic interactionism offers a micro-level understanding of how gender roles and expectations are constructed and reinforced in daily educational interactions (Carter & Fuller, 2015). This perspective emphasizes meaning-making, social interaction, and identity formation within educational settings (Carter & Fuller, 2016). In Pakistani higher education institutions, gender is performed and negotiated through subtle social cues such as communication patterns, classroom dynamics, and teacher-student interactions. Teachers unconsciously encourage male assertiveness and reward female compliance, reinforcing gendered behaviors (Charmaz, Harris, & Irvine, 2019). Social labeling and expectations influence students' self-perceptions, academic confidence, and subject preferences. Thus, symbolic interactionism explains how everyday practices within universities, including informal peer relations, dress codes, and gendered spaces, reproduce broader social hierarchies (Dennis & Martin, 2005). These micro-interactions, though often overlooked, play a critical role in sustaining or challenging gender norms within educational contexts.

### **Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital and Habitus**

Bourdieu (1983) concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and field provide another robust framework for analyzing gender inequality in education. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, language, and cultural competencies that individuals acquire through

socialization, which have been converted into educational and social advantages (Bourdieu, 1986). In Pakistan, families with higher cultural and economic capital are more likely to provide their daughters with educational opportunities and supportive learning environments. Conversely, girls from working-class or rural families often lack the cultural capital valued by educational institutions, placing them at a disadvantage from the outset. The habitus, a set of internalized dispositions shaped by one's social background, further influences how students perceive and navigate educational spaces (Bourdieu, 1989). Gendered habitus, formed through patriarchal socialization, often leads females to internalize notions of modesty, obedience, and limited ambition, which affect their participation and confidence in higher education (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu's framework, therefore, highlights how inequality is reproduced through invisible mechanisms of culture, class, and socialization, rather than overt discrimination alone (Shoaib, 2021).

### **Integrative Sociological Framework**

By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, a more comprehensive understanding of gender inequality in Pakistani higher education emerges:

- Structural functionalism explains the persistence of traditional roles through socialization.
- Conflict theory reveals the power struggles that sustain inequality within institutions.
- Feminist theory challenges patriarchal ideologies and calls for gender justice.
- Symbolic interactionism uncovers the micro-level processes that construct gendered identities.
- Bourdieu's theory shows how class, culture, and habitus shape access and outcomes.

Together, these theories underscore that gender inequality in higher education is both structurally embedded and socially constructed, requiring multi-level interventions that address cultural, institutional, and interactional dimensions simultaneously.

### **Relevance to the Pakistani Context**

In Pakistan, where patriarchal values intersect with economic and regional inequalities, these sociological theories provide vital tools for interpreting the persistence of gender gaps. They explain why policy reforms alone are insufficient without transforming the social meanings and institutional cultures that underpin inequality. A sociological theoretical framework, therefore, not only enhances understanding but also guides actionable strategies for achieving genuine gender equity in higher education.

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that gender inequality in higher education in Pakistan is a deeply rooted sociological issue shaped by the interaction of cultural norms, patriarchal structures, and institutional biases. Despite policy efforts and progress in female enrollment, females continue to face barriers in access, participation, and representation within academic spaces. A sociological perspective reveals that these inequalities are not isolated problems but manifestations of broader social hierarchies reproduced through education. The application of multiple sociological theories including structural functionalism, conflict theory, feminist theory, symbolic interactionism, and Bourdieu's concepts demonstrates that gender inequality operates at structural, cultural, and interactional levels. Achieving gender equity in higher education requires more than policy adjustments; it demands transformative social change, gender-sensitive institutional reforms, and a critical rethinking of how education serves as a space for empowerment rather than the reproduction of inequality. Addressing gender disparities in Pakistan's higher education system is essential not only for the advancement of women but also for the country's broader goals of social justice, inclusivity, and sustainable development.

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