

# ► Research Brief

December 2020

## Public attitudes towards migrant workers in Japan

### ► Summary

In Japan, international migrants account for less than 2 per cent of the total population of approximately 126 million persons (Migration Policy Institute, 2018). Japan provided limited opportunities for admission of workers in elementary and middle skilled occupations until recently. An ageing population and increased demand for care workers, labour shortages in small and medium-sized enterprises, and limitations of the industrial trainee scheme have been key conditions for policy change.

In June 2018, the Government announced a new “Specified Skills” visa, with a plan to admit 500,000 migrant workers by 2025 (Deguchi, 2018). Migrant workers are admitted across 14 industries, with nursing, hospitality and construction as priority employment sectors. Nine MoUs on labour migration have so far been signed under the new policy, including with Cambodia, Nepal, the Philippines and Viet Nam.

In Japan there is a commitment, through the ratification of the ILO’s Convention 181, to respect the principle that migrant workers should not pay fees for their migration. While the Government of Japan has committed to this principle as well as other migrant workers’ rights, this research shows that a significant proportion of the public often have negative perceptions about migrant workers. These negative attitudes are in contradiction to the actual contribution made by migrant workers to Japan’s economy and society, as they fill labour market shortages and perform jobs that Japanese workers no longer want or are able to perform.

In order to understand the overall level of public support towards migrant workers, the Safe and Fair (ILO and UN Women) and TRIANGLE in ASEAN (ILO) programmes conducted a four-country study of public attitudes in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. The full report

### Key Policy Recommendations

#### Promote inclusion and community engagement with migrant workers through policy and practice

Ensure that women and men migrant workers are able to fully access rights and freedoms in line with international labour and human rights standards.

Design policies that facilitate platforms and community events where migrant workers and the public can meaningfully interact.

Promote social inclusion through city planning by avoiding separation of migrant workers’ accommodation.

#### Raise awareness among general public

Design campaigns to raise awareness by providing accurate and positive information about migrant workers and their contribution to the national economy.

Complement and reinforce public campaigns with targeted interventions directed at “influencer” groups such as schools and news media.



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### Leverage the positive public support for women migrant workers

Design policies to address violence against women migrant workers and ensure that pregnant women migrant workers have access to maternity leave.

Design and enforce regulations aimed at improving the working conditions of women migrant domestic workers, as well as ratification of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).

can be found at: [https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS\\_732443/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_732443/lang--en/index.htm). This brief highlights findings related to Japan.

The study explores public attitudes related to labour market shortages, migration and crime, social and cultural threats, equal treatment with nationals, and violence against women migrant workers. The research also inquires specifically about the domestic work sector. The survey targeted members of the Japanese aged 18–65 years, and covered all major regions. A gender quota was applied, ensuring representativeness with regards to men and women across each region.<sup>1</sup> In total, 1,051 Japanese were surveyed.

This 2019 study confirms that people who know and engage with migrant workers on a personal level are more likely to be supportive of migrants and have a positive attitude towards them. People with limited or no interaction with migrant workers are less supportive.

The study finds that positive public support exists for policy initiatives aimed at supporting women migrant workers, especially related to ending violence against women and improved working conditions for domestic workers. This tends to show that focused attention towards a particular group of migrant workers and specific issues concerning those workers can help generate more public support.

The findings suggest that programmes and policies must further encourage interaction and community engagement with migrants, and must discourage exclusion, isolation and discrimination.



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<sup>1</sup> For the detailed methodology, refer to the full report: ILO and UN Women. *Public Attitudes towards Migrant Workers in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand* (Bangkok, 2019).

## ► Findings

### Public support for migrant workers

#### Labour market shortages: Need for migrant workers

Migrants fill labour shortages in key sectors – such as manufacturing, domestic and care work, services, and agriculture. In Japan, 85 per cent of employers say they have difficulty filling vacancies. However, Japan’s immigration policy has historically allowed skilled migrant workers but restricted the employment of “low-skilled” migrant workers, allowing entry primarily only through the Technical Intern Training Programme. In 2018, a new immigration law was passed, opening a visa scheme to allow entry to manual workers, who can stay for five years with visa renewal options.

Despite clear labour market shortages, as well as the economic gains to be made from labour migration, not all of the public are convinced of the need for migrant workers in Japan. The study survey shows that a significant minority of the Japanese public say that:

- The country does not need “low-skilled” migrant workers (35 per cent).
- Migrant workers are a drain on the economy (32 per cent).
- Migrant workers have an overall negative effect on the economy (25 per cent) (see figures 1 and 2).

When asked if respondents have spoken (in the last 12 months) or would speak to friends or colleagues about some positive contribution migrant workers make, only 23 per cent of Japanese respondents answered positively. The low proportion of migrants in Japan may mean that there have not yet been opportunities for many nationals to see and understand what migrants’ positive contributions are.

#### Migration and crime: Unfounded fears

There is little evidence to back up the claim that migrant workers are more likely to commit crimes than the rest of the population. However, a significant minority of Japanese public believe that migrant workers do commit more crimes (see figure 1):

- 44 per cent say that migrants commit a high number of the crimes.
- 52 per cent say that they thought crime rates had increased due to migration.

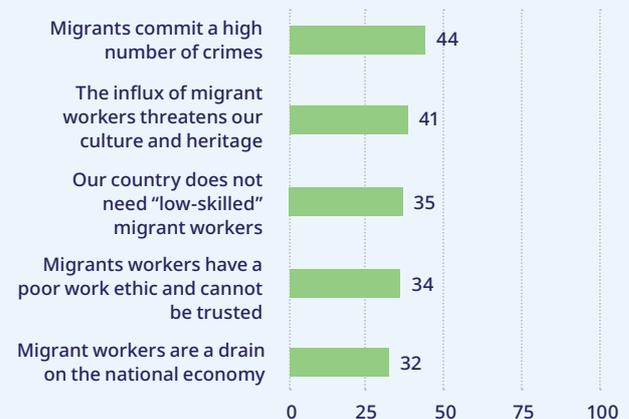
#### Social inclusion versus social and cultural threats

This study found a sizeable minority of the Japanese public tends to believe that migrant workers are a threat to the country’s culture and heritage, and say migrant workers have a poor work ethic and cannot be trusted (see figure 1).

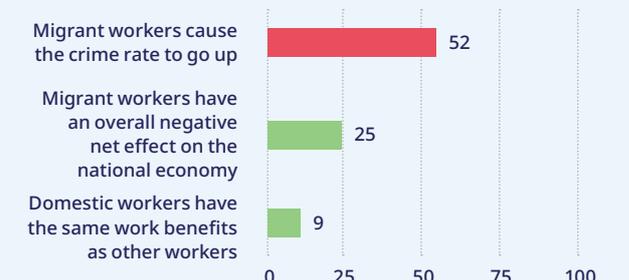
More concerning is that the majority of Japanese do not appear willing to actively engage in public behaviours to enable the inclusion of migrants, with the survey finding:

- 39 per cent say they had or would help a migrant integrate into their community or get ahead in their work; and
- 26 per cent say they had spoken or would speak out against someone who was saying offensive things about migrants.

**Figure 1. Attitudes about migrant workers - Support for the following statements (%)**



**Figure 2. Misconceptions about migrant workers - Support for the following statements (%)**



## Equal treatment of migrant workers

Equality of treatment is enshrined in international human rights instruments and labour standards. This study showed that belief in equality of treatment is not necessarily the norm in terms of public attitudes towards migrant workers.

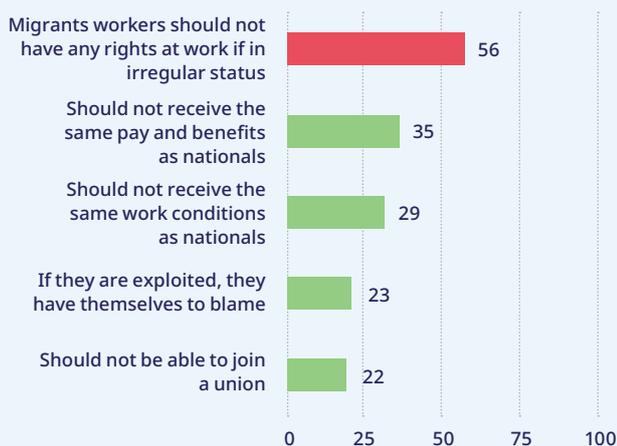
Substantial minorities of the Japanese public surveyed are of the view that:

- If migrant workers are exploited, they have themselves to blame.
- Migrant workers should not receive the same salary and benefits as national workers.
- Migrant workers should nor receive the same work conditions.

But a majority of the Japanese respondents expressed the view that migrant workers should not have any rights at work if they are in irregular status (figure 3).

These attitudes indicate that many citizens hold a fundamental view that migrant workers should be treated differently. Discrimination is therefore a problem that needs to be tackled through law enforcement as well as through efforts to influence social norms and attitudes.

**Figure 3. Attitudes on equal treatment of migrant workers - Support for the following statements (%)**



## Treatment of women migrant workers

When asked whether women migrant workers specifically should have equal wages with women nationals doing the same job, a majority supported this (figure 4).

In Japanese law, women migrant workers are protected from pregnancy discrimination. The majority of the public (66 per cent) do support offering maternity leave to migrant women. Yet, on the other hand, a majority of survey respondents do not support women migrants being allowed to work while pregnant (figure 4), a contradiction in sentiment that also apparently stands in opposition to national labour law.

**Figure 4. Attitude on treatment of women migrant workers - Support for the following statements**



## Violence against women migrant workers

As outlined in the United Nations' 2017 Report of the Secretary-General on Violence against Women Migrant Workers,

Migration can foster women's empowerment and, through new opportunities and personal expansion, improve their agency and autonomy, yet the feminized, informal sectors in which many migrant women work are characterized by low wages, poor working conditions, limited labour and social protections, and exposure to physical and sexual violence.

Prevention and services to assist women migrant victims of violence were the issues for which the surveyed Singaporean public gave their strongest support. A strong majority of the public supports stronger law enforcement to reduce violence against migrant women (67 per cent), and also supports migrant women having access to shelters if they experience violence (68 per cent) (figure 5).

Harnessing this strong public support for freedom from violence for migrant women and turning it into law and action is imperative, especially at a moment when governments, trade unions and employers, with the full support of CSOs, around the world have come together to adopt new international instruments to counter violence. The June 2019 International Labour Conference adopted the Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and Recommendation (No. 206), 2019, which recognize the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment.

Whether migrating through regular or irregular channels, women migrant workers can face the risk of violence and abuse from intermediaries and employers, as well as from partners and others. They experience intersectional forms of discrimination based on multiple identities, including job sector, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, legal status, age, pregnancy status, marital status and language, among others. Women migrant survivors of violence face multiple challenges while seeking justice or accessing essential services. Because of little access to protection and support services, absence of protection orders, limited referral networks and coordination mechanisms, lack of language interpreters, as well as fear of deportation or of losing their jobs, many migrant women suffer in silence.

Therefore, services must be available regardless of migration status, and in sufficient quantity and quality, and these services need to respond in ways that integrate human rights, cultural sensitivity and respect for survivors' choices. Key components of response are high-quality, accessible survivor-centred (for instance, non-judgmental) services by health actors, police and justice, and social services. Effective coordination is also paramount, as services cannot keep survivors safe and support healing when they work in isolation.

Migrants who experience violence face barriers to reporting it. Women migrant workers may also struggle to access services due to perceptions around their respectability or due to victim blaming. Pervasive negative attitudes can also further isolate migrant women, restricting their movement and preventing them from seeking support due to fear of reprisals. In Japan, however, 43 per cent of Japanese respondents believed migrant workers who experience violence would report the abuse.

**Figure 5. Addressing violence against women - Support for the following statements**



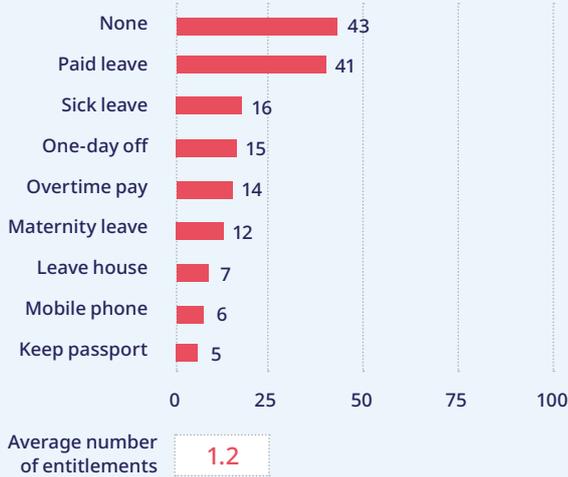
## Domestic workers: Same treatment, better protections

The Japanese public also strongly support improved labour conditions of domestic workers, though respondents who employ domestic workers are less supportive. Overall figures show that 64 per cent support better labour conditions for domestic workers, and 72 per cent also support recognition of care work as a formal profession.

This public support does not appear to translate, however, into decent work conditions and the provision of work entitlements. The survey asked Japanese respondents if they employ a domestic worker in their home, and if so, asked them about the working conditions they provide to their employees. Employers were presented with a list of eight entitlements they might provide to domestic workers (such as paid leave, overtime pay, ability to hold their passports or a phone, or a day off per week), and Japanese employers report a very low rate of rights-based provisions - an average of one entitlement to their domestic worker employees. This is the lowest level among the three countries surveyed (Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand), and presents serious rights concerns. Some 43 per cent of Japanese employers said they do not provide any entitlements to domestic workers. The most commonly provided entitlement is paid leave, and the most commonly denied entitlements are access to workers' passports and mobile phones (figure 6).

On the question of whether they would advise a friend to pay the cost of a domestic workers' work permit, not more than 40 per cent said they would advise to do so. This indicates costs may be being passed on to workers.

**Figure 6. Work entitlements provided to migrant domestic workers by surveyed employers (%)**



Base: Japanese employers of migrant domestic workers, n=233

## Factors that correlate with public support for migrant workers

### Frequency and type of interaction with migrant workers

The study explored whether demographic variables correlated with public support for migrant workers and found that they are not strongly associated. Instead of demographic variables, frequency and quality of interaction with migrant workers are a strong predictor of support for migrant workers generally.

Japanese respondents with regular interaction with migrant workers - and who also have friends or work colleagues who are migrant workers, employ migrant workers or supervise staff who are migrant workers - have more support for migrant workers.

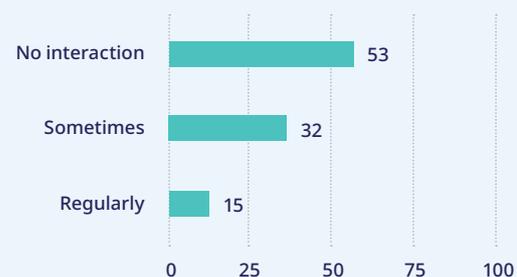
Japan-based respondents report the lowest level of encounters with migrant workers, with 53 per cent saying they have never encountered a migrant worker, and 32 per cent saying they have only occasionally (figure 7).

Japanese respondents who have encounters with migrant workers were asked to describe the type of relationship they have had with them. Such relationships

are generally weak, with a majority of respondents who have encountered migrant workers saying they do not know them at all. That means, nearly four in five people in Japan do not know any migrant workers personally. A much smaller proportion of respondents report knowing migrant workers personally, and in most cases, they are acquaintances (figure 8).

It is critical, therefore, to encourage more interaction between Japanese communities and migrant workers. Decreasing the distance between nationals and migrant workers requires a multi-pronged approach including city planning, workplace inclusion, community platforms, and changes to laws and policy to ensure there are no exclusions or “special rules” that keep migrant workers from enjoying fair and equal treatment.

**Figure 7. Frequency of interaction with migrant workers, 2019 (%)**



**Figure 8. Type of relationship with migrant workers, 2010 and 2019 (%)<sup>2,3</sup>**



<sup>2</sup> Only includes respondents who reported interactions with migrant workers (n=496).

<sup>3</sup> Due to rounding, percentages may not precisely reflect the absolute figures.



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## Role of news and media

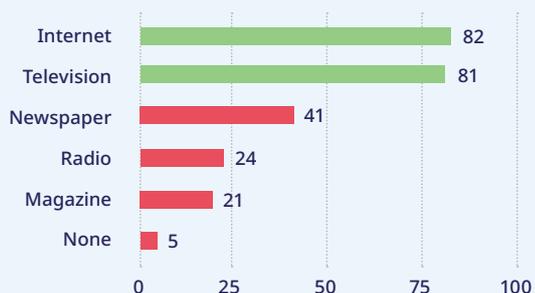
Based on evidence that mass media shapes opinion about migration and drives behaviour, survey respondents were asked about the number and type of media sources they consume. The internet is the most popular medium (82 per cent). Television is a close second at 81 per cent; while newspapers are less commonly accessed with 41 per cent of the Japanese respondents reporting reading them (figure 9). Line is the most popular social media platform, followed by Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Google+. The number of social media platforms used by Japanese respondents stands at three per person, on average.

The study finds that the more news media sources people consume, the more supportive they are of migrant workers, irrespective of the type of media source. Media, specifically news reports, social media and TV programmes, remain the most prominent source of information about migrant workers. The average number of news media sources regularly consumed by Japanese respondents was 2.6 per person.

Japanese respondents reported accessing a lower number of news media sources than respondents from other study countries, with 50 per cent reporting only following one news source or no news source at all.

Given the importance that the media has in shaping opinions towards migrant workers, some interviewed stakeholders highlighted that news media can distort the contribution made by migrant workers rather than showing how they contribute to the economy.

**Figure 9. Regular use of mass media (%)**



Base: n=1,051

## ► Recommendations

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### 1. Promote inclusion, social interaction and community engagement with migrant workers in destination countries, including through changes to policy and practice.

- 1.1 Stimulate attitude changes on specific issues to tackle discrimination and barriers that prevent the fair treatment of migrant workers, especially women, and social inclusion.
  - Ensure that women and men migrant workers are able to fully access rights and freedoms in line with international labour and human rights standards.
  - Adopt policies, regulations and operating procedures that support social inclusion, including access to services, social security, schools, and health facilities, including those specialized in addressing violence and abuses.
  - City planning can promote social inclusion by avoiding separation of migrant workers' accommodation. Physical distance is a barrier that hinders migrant workers from integrating into the local community and encourages segregation and discrimination.
  - Ensure that labour migration mechanisms are accessible, affordable and not time consuming. Across all four countries, respondents said that migrant workers with regular status can adapt better than those without.
- 1.2 Design, support and deliver policies that facilitate platforms and community events where migrant workers and the public can meaningfully interact and demonstrate the positive impact of migrant workers on societies and economies.
- 1.3 Encourage inclusion in the workplace by working with employers and trade unions to promote the rights of migrant workers. Trade unions could promote solidarity and encourage inclusion by accepting and supporting migrant workers to join as members.
- 1.4 Avoid dehumanizing terms to refer to migrants and migrant workers in legal texts and other official documents.

### 2. Conduct awareness-raising activities with the general public.

- 2.1 Design campaigns to raise awareness by providing accurate and positive information about migrant workers and their contribution to national economy. The study identified that the majority of the respondents had limited knowledge about the important contributions migrant workers make to Japan. Information

campaigns can help to inform the public ideally by working on shifting social norms and shared values. It is important to focus on specific sectors and problems so that the public can relate to the messages in a more personalized way.

- Promote campaigns that address the root of negative attitudes towards migrant workers. Strive to develop a personal connection between the public and migrant workers by focusing on specific migrant work sectors and on interactions among nationals and migrant workers within those sectors.
  - Promote evidence of the beneficial impacts of migrant workers to strengthen positive attitudes while at the same time debunking common myths about them, such as the characterization of migrant workers as criminals, as taking jobs from nationals, or as having a negative impact on the economy. Promote messages about the empowerment that can result when women in particular have positive migration experiences.
  - Tackle stigma and raise the status of roles and work sectors in which migrant workers work. Undervaluing the work of migrants has negative consequences and can lead to discrimination and social exclusion. Promoting the importance of decent work, equal opportunities, social protection, gender equality and inclusion are essential.
  - Take care to ensure that messaging does not promote migrant workers – especially women migrant workers – as “victims” or inherently vulnerable. This can feed into narratives that migrant workers are weaker and powerless, and through emphasizing difference, undermine migrant workers' claims to the same rights at work as nationals.
- 2.2 Complement and reinforce public campaigns with targeted interventions directed to influencer groups.
    - Encourage governments, in partnership with international organizations and other relevant actors, to encourage schools to promote positive behaviour towards migrant workers and members of their families. The study highlighted a general lack of knowledge about migrant workers' rights. But public education on prejudice and diversity can shape attitudes towards migrant workers as well as change discriminatory social norms and stereotypical behaviors.

- Implement interventions to encourage more balanced and inclusive reporting, as well as non-discriminatory terminology used by the news media when reporting stories about migrant workers. News media are influential and impact the public's attitudes as well as policy-makers' agendas. Terms such as "undocumented" and "irregular" can be used rather than "illegal"; and "migrant" rather than "alien". At all opportunities, humanize the individual representation of migrant workers and avoid descriptions that overemphasize the number of migrant workers or depict the migrant population as degrading the dominant culture.

2.3 Continue to track shifts and trends in public support for migrant workers in countries of destination. Doing so will allow ongoing campaigns and other interventions to adjust to any changes in public attitudes. More frequent tracking of attitudes can also enable studies to identify causation of changes in public support for migrant workers.

### **3. Harness opportunities available given the high degree of public support for women migrant workers, including opportunities to address violence against women.**

- 3.1 Leverage the positive public support for ending violence against women migrant workers. Respondents showed high levels of support for access to shelters for women who experience violence and for stronger enforcement against violence. It is recommended to work with governments, trade unions, and NGOs to ensure the availability of shelters and comprehensive services designed to meet the needs of women migrant worker survivors of violence.
- Ratify the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190).
  - Governments, employers, trade unions and NGOs should run campaigns to end violence and harassment, including against migrant women and other marginalized groups, in the world of work. Awareness raising and campaigning should form an important part of combined strategies linked to prevention of violence and harassment in the world of work.
  - Governments, employers, trade unions and CSOs should make sure information on available VAW services, including shelters, are available and widely disseminated.
  - Governments, trade unions and CSOs, including labour migration organizations should make sure to have tools and capacities to refer survivors of violence and abuse to available

VAW services through established referral pathways.

- 3.2 Leverage the public support for women migrant workers to receive maternity leave. Policy change and/or enforcement is needed in migrant countries of destination to ensure women migrant workers have de jure and de facto access to maternity leave within broader social security schemes, and that they are not discriminated against on the grounds of pregnancy, either at work or during recruitment.
- 3.3 Support governments and employers to actively promote gender-sensitive policies and practices that tackle gender stereotypes and occupational segregation. Strong gender segregation of occupation in the region is the result of stereotypical perceptions of what women can or cannot do as well as the consequence of gender-differentiated barriers in access to specific job opportunities.

### **4. Address declining attitudes of employers of domestic workers.**

- 4.1 Governments, trade unions and other stakeholders, including domestic workers groups, should conduct a coordinated and evidence-based publicity campaign on the social and economic value of domestic work; and on the rights of domestic workers. Domestic work is often undervalued, and often not fully considered as work, either by employers or through lack of full inclusion in national labour laws.
- 4.2 All stakeholders, including and especially the media, should use respectful terms to describe domestic workers. They should avoid terms such as "servant", "maid" and "helper", and instead use "domestic worker", which squarely shows that domestic workers are workers, and not servile or part of the family.
- 4.3 Leverage the positive public support for domestic workers to design and enforce regulations aimed at improving the working conditions of women migrant workers, as well as ratification of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189). Respondents showed high levels of support for recognition of care workers, improvement of the working conditions of domestic workers, and equal labour rights for domestic workers on par with nationals. Japan has not yet ratified Convention No. 189.
- 4.4 Conduct further research to understand the knowledge, attitudes and practices (work entitlements provided) of employers of migrant domestic workers. Such a study is critical in light of the fact that employers today appear to show less support for migrant workers than before.

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