

Master Suppression Techniques

The origin of the term

The concept of master techniques of suppression was first coined by **Berit Ås**, Norwegian scholar of Social Psychology, politician and feminist activist. In Norwegian, the term hersketeknikker is well-known and widely used. There have been several attempts to translate the term into English, such as master techniques of suppression and domination techniques.

Domination techniques refer to techniques, actions and behavior used consciously or unconsciously to disrespect or mock people during the conversations.

People of all genders use such techniques from time to time, and therefore, people regardless of their gender may be exposed to them. However, the occurrence of domination techniques should be understood in the context of power relations in society. Often it is the stronger and most privileged person, who uses domination techniques against a communicator with less power.

Berit Ås noticed and named the phenomenon of domination techniques while working in a male-dominated workplace during the 1970s. She experienced sexist discrimination, and she fought back.

After experiences of being ignored in the workplace, being interrupted, feeling stupid, and not getting her voice heard, she started studying what the men around her were saying and doing. How did they present themselves when speaking? How did they behave when a female coworker was speaking? After a while she decided to copy what the men were doing.

While the men were speaking she would demonstratively get up to have another cup of coffee or grab her pen and start doodling on a paper, or simply read and visibly not pay attention. Somehow, this behavior worked. She experienced that the worse she behaved, the more she was taken seriously.

Instead of to simply continue to misbehave at work, Berit Ås, decided to use these observations for good, and she wrote a book about these techniques. In 1981, the book **Kvinner i alle land. Håndbok for frigjøring – Women of all countries. Handbook for liberation**, was published, and the term hersketeknikker, master techniques of suppression, was established.

Berit Ås has intentionally chosen and named five techniques. As she shared her experiences and the concept with other women, the techniques were later used strategically for communication of women in the workplace. If a woman was exposed to any of the five techniques, other women could discreetly show a number of fingers to let her know that they see what is going on.

For instance, if, during a meeting, a woman would be exposed to ridicule, other women

would discreetly show to fingers in order to notify her. The purpose of this practice was to raise awareness about suppression techniques and ensure that the person affected would know that unfair methods are used against her. When the use of domination techniques is exposed, the concept becomes a little less effective.

Rationale

The aim of this brochure and concept is to make more girls and women participate in society. Because females make up half the world's population, we should have half the power and as many formal positions and authority as men. This is not the fact at present. Women and girls are systematically underrepresented in decision-making, positions around the world, less visible in the media, hold fewer parliamentary seats and occupy fewer leading posts in political parties than men.

Women's and girls' opinions are important and should be heard. Women often hold back from speaking their mind, worried that they will not be as eloquent as the boys, will not be listened to, or they are afraid to be ridiculed or neglected.

This publication is aiming at helping to build their confidence, learning the rules of political and organizational work and giving courage to speak out and taking part in decision-making processes in everyday life.

It is important to target girls at a young age and help them to overcome gender stereotypes and build strong position of a person with high self-esteem.

Empowering

With this concept we want to empower girls, motivate them to speak up, make their voices heard and support each other.

Unsurprisingly, there is no common definition of women's empowerment - in fact, the word "empowerment" does not exist in most languages – but it is crucial to define how we understand that process in our approach. It is the same as described by Agata Teutsch in "Power, courage, solidarity. Empowerment as an effective strategy to counter violence against women and girls and other gender-based violence. A Handbook for organizations and institutions" a magnificent publication which gives deep understanding and explanations to the roots and conditions of empowerment. There we can read that:

"Empowerment is the approach used since the 1960s. the last century in emancipation, anti-discrimination, as well as in social work, psychiatry, business, health care and in management. From the beginning it is connected with feminism and emancipatory pedagogy. Empowerment, beyond the individual, reveals the culture and the systemic (or structural) nature of discrimination and oppression. Empowerment is a process in which people from oppressed groups regain individual and collective control over one's own life, the space, the laws, and the language which describes the reality, including also themselves.

It is important to point out that the process of empowerment occurs both to obtain and to regain rights, control, power, to make visible existing (but often dull, invisible, forgotten, unused) resources and competence.”[1]

Awareness

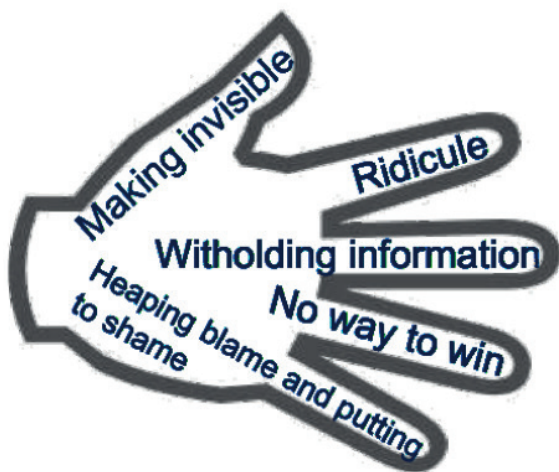
We want to raise women’s and girls’ awareness about some special techniques, called dominant techniques, which often stop girls or reduce their power in society, though they are present everywhere. Knowing these can help them to understand, clarify, handle and give them power and make it easier to get where they want.

This concept is one way of increasing women’s participation.

Encouraging women and girls to participate in society, at school, in NGOs, in political parties, speaking up at work or in the family, is important.

This brochure can be used independently by an organization for the general purpose or increasing women’s participation in society, or it can be a part of a bigger educational set, used during workshops held at school, summer-schools, within a party or organization for increasing the number of women and girls within.

Berit Ás – 5 fingers theory



[1] Training manual of project “Young women for social change” realized by Active Women Association in partnership with Shuhada organization, Ashna organization and Women Empowered Afghanistan within the frame of Erasmus+ Program

Short description of techniques is posed below. For the trainers we suggest to discuss with participants different examples of techniques and motivate participants to share their experience including possible counter strategies of how to deal with such situations and how to defend ourselves.

1. Making Someone Invisible

- Mainly manifested by ignoring the speaker (leafing through papers, writing text messages, talking to one another, going to the toilet)
- Overlooking – e.g. question „Do you sit here alone, ladies?“

Making someone invisible occurs when someone is subconsciously or intentionally ignored, overlooked or forgotten. This means that a person chooses to treat another person or a group of people as if they were not there. When someone is treated that way, then he/she is silenced and marginalized therefore he/she is made to feel insignificant, worthless and ultimately powerless. A person who is made invisible might feel unimportant, diminished and he/she might not continue the involvement in the particular thing he/she is involved in.

This is generally a wordless method. For instance, it is used when a woman starts to speak but men start talking to each other, read their papers, leaving for bathroom and so on. A woman who occurs in a such situation might feel that no one is listening to her because of her, but in fact, these situations happen mostly to women so they are distanced from power/ power positions

The reason why are men comfortable with not paying attention to what women have to say, and why some women fail to see this master suppression technique, is because the norms are designed in such a way that both men and women got used to see the male culture as predominant. Many people often fail to notice that women indeed have different problems, experiences and conditions than men. And many women choose to ignore this type of situation so they do not question the order of things.

2. Ridicule

- Frequent jokes about those in subordinate position (women, minorities...) impression that it is legitimate to ridicule these people in public
- The aim of such behavior is to belittle women (or other disadvantaged) and their actions

Ridiculing occurs when women's efforts are mocked, scorned or likened to animals (like chickens), when women are presented as extremely emotional or sexual, when they are rejected as cold or manipulative, and/or when someone is made fun of at the expense of women. Using the expression “stupid blonde” for something man does not agree with, “like an old grandma” for people who are extra-careful or fussy about driving, “hysterical” for women expressing a strong disagreement etc.

It is important to notice that men are in general not put to such tests and if they are, they are ridiculed as being “like a little girl, like a woman.” Here again the ridiculing occurs at the expense of women. Such things are so common in societies that it is sometimes very difficult to detect them. But people, especially women, who are aware of the usage of such techniques, can pinpoint it and fight back.

Examples:

Two interviews in the same show: Schröder - <http://youtu.be/0RrxNcaig5c>.

Merkel - <http://youtu.be/3xKcAVhR8SQ>

Ridicule: Ariana Grande radio interview - lipstick question:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTtMQrSS_q0

Objectification? Man “diving” under an actress dress

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpzmRx9e-Ec>

Cate Blanchett on red carpet to camera man: do you do that to man?

<https://youtu.be/k6hz7WoO6Bo>

Trump refusing to shake Merkel's hand - Rendering Invisible

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3eFZMvNS1U>

3. Withholding Information

- Very efficient way how to keep others in ignorance
- Men often discuss important issues in the places, which women can't access (sauna, locker rooms, bars...)

Withholding information is consciously or unconsciously leaving women in the dark while making decisions with other men about important issues. In this way the person left out-generally women- is kept in the dark about the process of decision and has less of a say in the decision making.

There are numerous occasions in which men gather with other men for various reasons such as intercompany football, sauna, rotary meetings, drinking after work and so on. Women do not always participate in such men-only gatherings. And in these gatherings, men exchange information about their work as well. Having already exchanged so much information with one another and agreed on terms, in the next formal meeting, they quickly make their decisions. In such occasions, women are basically left out of the decision-making processes.

This is a strong master suppression technique because women who are left out, subsequently feel lonely, insecure and less capable. This pushes them even more to the edges and allows men and male culture to dominate more.

4. No Way to Win

- Whatever you do is wrong... imagine football referees: no matter how they decide, always one team (and its fans) is angry
- E.g. if you behave calmly, you are considered too shy, if you act forcefully, you are labelled „hysterical woman“

This is a master suppression technique which creates unpleasant situations for women, in which they are scolded in any possible outcome, whether positive or negative. It is a technique which makes people feel in a certain way, that no matter what they do, they are not good enough.

This technique is used against women so that they are accused of being bad mothers when they are involved in politics or work life and of being “switched-off” if they prioritize their home and children.

A female manager can be perceived as weak if she tries to listen and act democratically, and as lacking femininity if she shows her claws and forces her through. Similarly, a female politician can be accused of tunnel vision if she insists on women’s interests and of being a traitor if she does not. This is a devastating technique for creating constant guilty conscience and a feeling of inadequacy.

5. Heaping Blame and Putting to Shame

- Frequent victimization – women often feel responsible for being abused or in the other cases when something bad happens to them

This particular method is inflicted on women through ridicule and double punishment to make women feel that they are themselves guilty for humiliating treatment or abuse they receive. For example, things like “she was wearing a short skirt, so she partly invited the abuse” are used effectively to make women believe that they are responsible for what happens to them in case of rape.

By being made invisible day in and day out the woman feels insignificant, through the ridicules she feels silly, through withholding information she feels less capable and insecure. All of above mentioned add into the unjustified feelings of shame and groundless tendency to accept the blame for all the world’s ills.

Women are blamed for their skirts if they get raped, are branded impossible to work with if they refuse their buttocks are being patted at work and such things are so common and normalized that they become more imperative to detect and remove.

How to act and react to manipulative behavior?

- Be confident! – nobody is perfect, you are not worse than the others, moreover, it is important to become conscious of the fact that you are not the one who failed
- Be prepared! – get ready for similar situations, consciously present your true self and argue if necessary

- Watch the session or meeting closely! – learn to recognize master suppression techniques

One of the biggest problems is that many aspects of these techniques are accepted as part of the norms in many societies. It is also a commonsense that power is strongest when it is not challenged. Once suppression techniques are normalized, they are also made invisible. Once they are invisible, it is nearly impossible to change them.

It is one of the key-aims of this project to address these suppression techniques, discuss how they are used by those in power against those who are less powerful, ways to recognize these and means to fight against them. It is indeed possible to detect these methods once they are employed by someone. And it is possible to fight these techniques back in order to eliminate them. Therefore, the situation is not hopeless as long as we detect, fight back and eliminate them.

Defend yourself! – assertively point out that the opponent is acting unfairly. Remember you don't want yourself to use master suppression techniques against others.

WHAT ELSE IS IMPORTANT?

While we all see the Master-Suppression Techniques as a useful tool in girls' and women's emancipation, we need to put it in the context of disadvantaged position of women in society, as it is not only a personal, situational level we want to drive your attention to.

We want to point out, that patriarchy is the prime obstacle to women's advancement and development. The systemic inequality - despite differences in levels of domination - remains embedded in the fact that men are the ones who are in control. The nature of this control may differ, as different are power relations in which other parts of women's identity also play part. But it is necessary to understand the system, which keeps women dominated and subordinate, and to unravel its workings in order to work, also with Master-Suppression techniques, for women's development in a systematic way. In contemporary world patriarchy there creates obstacles for women to go forward in society, because patriarchal institutions and social relations are responsible for the inferior or secondary status of women. In order to understand the complexity of the women's position, we need to use the intersectional approach, which explains how not only gender, but also other identity's elements are positioning women in patriarchal society. Patriarchy refers to the male domination both in public and private spheres. In this way, feminists use the term 'patriarchy' to describe the power relationship between men and women as well as to find out the root cause of women's subordination. But gender is no longer the only perspective we need to take into account of we want to eradicate discrimination. Intersectionality is a critical framework that provides us with the mindset and language for examining interconnections and interdependencies between social categories and systems. It is relevant to take it into consideration while prepa-

ring an empowerment program because it enhances analytical sophistication and offers theoretical explanations of the ways in which heterogeneous members of specific groups (such as women) might experience the situation differently depending on their ethnicity, sexual orientation, and/or class and other social locations. Sensitivity to such differences enhances insight into issues of social justice and inequality in organizations and other institutions, thus maximizing the chance of social change, which is the overall aim of using Master-Suppression techniques.

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