

Tools to combat domination techniques



The Power Handbook

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Domination Techniques and How to Combat Them

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Domination techniques are defined as strategies of social manipulation and domination by which a dominant group maintains its power and privilege. They are often used by men to assert themselves over women for instance by treating women as invisible, ridiculing them, withholding information, putting them in a double bind and shaming them.

In Sweden, the idea of domination techniques – as well as the strategies to combat them – has been disseminated to large segments of political parties and organisations across the country. Various role plays, films and exercises to combat these techniques have been developed, and these are used in schools, in political parties, and at workplaces.

One prominent example in the field of political decision-making is the [Power Handbook](#) by Sweden's National Federation of Social Democratic Women (S-kvinnor) which promotes ways to resist men's use of 'dominance techniques' and was published in eight languages. The Power Handbook articulates ways for women to obtain, keep and utilise power. The book not only explores how power can be achieved and is accessible at the level of institutions, but also through everyday interactions and personal relationships.

Five techniques for domination

The proportions of women and men in elected decision-making bodies in Sweden are relatively well-balanced. However the numerical gender balance in politics does not necessarily mean that the sexes share power and influence equally. Gendered norms about who is a proper political leader and who should be making political decisions persist, and those in power may consciously or unconsciously use various strategies to maintain their power and privileges. One such strategy is the use of domination techniques, also called master suppression techniques. These are defined as strategies of social manipulation and domination by which a dominant group maintains its power and privilege. The practice was popularised in the 1970s by the Norwegian professor of social psychology, Berit Ås, who described five techniques for domination that men use to assert themselves (mostly) over women. They are:

- 1 Making invisible:** silencing and marginalising people by ignoring them. It includes for instance reformulating a colleague's idea as one's own, taking the floor when it is another one's turn to speak or not paying attention (e.g. by talking, browsing through papers or checking e-mails) while someone else is speaking.
- 2 Ridicule:** portraying someone else's arguments in a ridiculing way, or commenting on someone's appearance.
- 3 Withholding information:** sharing information among an inner circle, without telling everyone concerned. For instance making decisions not at the board meeting where everyone is present, but in a small group at the bar afterwards.
- 4 Double bind:** putting people in a situation in which they will be belittled and penalised whichever alternative they choose or regardless of how they act. For example, when a person does a thorough work there are complaints for being too slow. When the work is done efficiently, there is criticism for being sloppy.
- 5 Blaming and shaming:** embarrassing someone, or insinuating that they are themselves to blame for their position.

Tools to fight back

Various counter-strategies have been developed to combat these domination techniques, which have since been used in politics, schools and civil society organisations throughout Sweden. They include techniques such as “respect” and “demand information”.

Examples of these exercises can be found in printed form and on the internet, and various sectors in society have adapted the counter-strategies to fit into their own contexts.

One example of this is the Power Handbook published by the National Federation of Social Democratic Women (S-kvinnor). The book gives women practical advice on how to get access to political power and influence, particularly in political parties. It provides step by step guidance to achieve the goal (e.g. learn the rules, analyse power structures, put forward women candidates, increase women’s representation in decision making, in selection committees, in working groups, in campaign groups and chair meetings). It also presents the five domination techniques by Berit Ås, and gives advice on how to counter them. The book outlines the steps that women can take as individuals and in groups to get more women into decision-making bodies, and raises awareness about gender dynamics so that women will be more effective once they get there. The booklet observes that ‘there are innumerable traps on the road towards fair power for women. This handbook identifies the traps and provides a guide on how we can avoid or eliminate them’. It emphasises that politics is not only about being a candidate. There needs to be gender balance behind the scenes, if a party is to be credible to women voters. It gives concrete tips on how to change things. The wider benefit of this initiative is that the ideas easily cross party lines, and can be used by a wide variety of women’s political organisations. Across Europe, political parties try to train their politicians, and sharing of good training material on working together to make gender balance a reality is a way to empower ever-broader groups of citizens.

Further examples of initiatives that have been developed in Sweden to raise awareness of domination techniques include role plays and films such as for instance a video made in 1992 by the municipality of Växjö illustrating various domination techniques and strategies to combat them. This video was widely disseminated across Sweden when it was published. Today, YouTube films are used.

Broad dissemination

Awareness of domination techniques and the strategies to combat them has been widely disseminated in Swedish society. The concepts are discussed in schools, and pupils are taught how to combat domination techniques by taking part in role plays, watching YouTube clips etc. Domination techniques are also discussed in workplaces, politics and civil society, as part of combatting discrimination and promoting a good working climate.

One reason for their broad spread is that the ideas are relevant to many different arenas and groups of people, and strategies to combat domination techniques can fairly easily be adapted to different contexts. Most people who watch the films can relate to the situations that are portrayed. The films also use humour to illustrate the situations in which domination techniques are deployed.

The Power Handbook, which serves as a guide to women for gaining power in political parties, was translated into several other languages including English, Spanish, French, and Serbian. It inspired others and became a useful resource for the development of similar Guides on achieving gender balance in different fields. The Council of Europe Guide for Balancing Decision-making (2001) refers to the Swedish good practice, as well as the recent OSCE Handbook on Promoting Women's Participation in Political Parties (2014).

Contacts/Further Information

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Further information

[The Power Handbook \(Makthandboken\), by S-kvinnor \(in Swedish, English, Spanish, Russian, Croatian, Turkish, French and Arabic\)](#)



[Going for Gender Balance: A guide for balancing decision-making, Council of Europe, 2002 \(.pdf\)](#)



Mobilising against gender inequality and gender-based violence, chapter 3 of Gender Matters – Manual on gender based violence affecting young people:



Handbook on harassment of women in schools: JämO:s handbook mot könsmobbing i skolan. Stockholm: Jämställdhetsombudsmannen (JämO), 2000.

Göran Persson utövar härskarteknik: Göran Persson, prime minister of Sweden 1996-2006, practices domination techniques against Maud Olofsson, leader of the Centre Party.



Materials on combating domination techniques at the workplace (in Swedish)



Materials on combating domination techniques in the police (in Swedish)



Materials on combating domination techniques in civil society organisations such as including trade unions and political parties(in Swedish)



Materials on combating domination techniques in women's shelters (in Swedish)



Materials on combating domination techniques in academia (.pdf)



Handbook on Promoting Women's Participation in Political Parties. OSCE. 2014 (.pdf)



More good practices

EIGE's collection of good practices



EIGE's approach to good practices



Downloads



Tools to combat domination techniques - Sweden

EN (PDF, 947.04 KB)

Metadata

TOOL: Awareness-raising