

Berit Ås



Berit Ås worked as Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Oslo. She was also the first Norwegian woman to

become party leader.

In her work as a teacher, researcher and political leader, Berit became very interested in the nature of repression. She has devoted special attention to the methods which individual men use, more or less consciously, to make individual female co-workers, colleagues and workmates conform to the image of the conventional woman - passive, submissive and repressed.

In her writings and talks, Berit exhorts women - and the more politically progressive men - to learn to recognize the five master suppression techniques that play an important role in maintaining the unjust power relation between men and women. Knowledge of these five techniques and their injurious effect is crucial to the development of a more equal society.

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Berit Ås: Master Suppression Techniques

Introduction



Nothing is as practical as good theory. Professor Berit Ås developed the theory of the master suppression techniques, thus making a tool women (and others) can use to identify what goes on when they are not listened to, when they are overlooked or ignored. Maybe it is not that you make a poor argument or fail to present a case properly. It may not have anything to do with the individual, but with the group membership you are given by others, like your gender. To identify the master suppression techniques is to make them visible and thereby neutralise their effect. Immensely practical, as well as useful.

The five master suppression techniques that Berit Ås identified are:

- Making Invisible
- Ridiculing
- Withholding Information
- Damned If You Do And Damned If You Don't
- Heaping Blame and Putting to Shame

In theory, techniques like these may be used on all suppressed groups. However, Berit Ås believes that they are used in specific combinations and situations in regards to women, due to the patriarchal society's definition of women as objects or property.

In co-operation with Berit Ås, KILDEN presents the master suppression techniques on the web. More than 20 years has passed since they were identified, written about and discussed for the first time, but they are still valid. To have knowledge of the master suppression techniques means that you too can reveal and reduce their effect.

1. Making Invisible

Ingrid is sitting in a board meeting. It is her first board meeting, and she was asked to speak for the first time. Her heart is pounding and the palms of her hands are dripping with sweat. "Why am I so nervous? All the others seem almost calm and relaxed."

The speaker before Ingrid starts talking. It's easy to see that he's used to this role. He pounds the table for emphasis, speaks loudly, and goes on and on. There is no doubt about it - here is someone who knows what he is talking about and he dares anyone to disagree!

It's Ingrid's turn. She quickly presents what she wanted to say. It doesn't take long. She feels her speech sounded just like a little peep. But now it's done. She waits for their response. But nothing comes. The meeting just rolls along as if she hasn't said a thing. Ingrid feels terrible. "Did I say something inappropriate or stupid?" she ponders. "I should never have opened my mouth."

"**Making invisible**" occurs when women are forgotten, overlooked or ignored. It robs women of their identity and once again reminds them that they are inferior, insignificant and have no influence.

Making someone invisible means that a person chooses to treat an individual or a group as if the person or group were not there.

Making women invisible is possible because both men and women are so used to the situation where man and male culture are the obvious, normal and important. We do not notice that women actually have different problems, interests and circumstances than men. On the woman's part, we choose most often to turn a blind eye so as not to disturb the safe, well-known order of things.

Making someone invisible is a powerful master suppression technique. Someone who is never seen and responded to with genuine interest feels insignificant, unsure, and incapable of action that brings about change. Making someone invisible can sometimes be difficult to discern because it often happens "without words." It is expressed through body language, i.e., gestures, or the lack of them.

By learning to recognize this master suppression technique, a woman can avoid the feeling of insignificance. She can make the world conscious of what is going on and demand with a good conscience that people listen when she speaks!

2. Ridiculing

Ella has just come back from a weekend at an equal rights conference that gave her much new information. Now she looks forward to telling the others what she had just learned.



"So was it a good conference?" asks Tom as she comes in through the door.

"Yes, it was very worthwhile," answers Ella. "There were about 150 women..." She didn't get any further. "What a hen-house!" someone shouts. The others quickly join in, laughing and cackling like hens.

Ella tries again and again to tell about the conference but she is cut short each time by yet another joke. Finally angry she shouts: "I don't give a damn. You can't stand what I say anyhow!" "Oh, we were only joking," the men answer. "Yes, but that's the way you react any time I come from a conference," Ella says angrily. "You always turn it into women's lib stuff." Ella gives up and goes home.



Ridiculing occurs when a woman's efforts are scorned, made fun of, or likened to animals (e.g., chickens), when women are presented as being especially emotional or sexual, or when women are rejected as cold or manipulative. None of these terms are applied instinctively to men's efforts.

It is ridicule when men hint, in various ways, that women are ludicrously incompetent and useless in everything except sex and traditional housework.

The ridicule of individual women and their work and culture is so common a practice that people often do not even notice. For example, there are numerous common expressions coined to ridicule women - and men! - such as "old woman" which refers to people who are ultra-careful and fussy about driving. The newspapers even include humor pages that tell supposedly funny stories, which suggest that young women are naive and the older ones are embittered, and that in either case, the world is better off under a strong male hand.

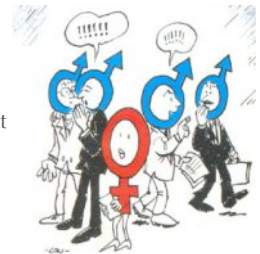
The flood of nude and semi-nude women in pornography and advertising is saying that most of us are no good really, or at least not good in our present state. If we want to join in and play, we'll have to have the fat sucked out and put up with our market value sinking as time passes.

Ridicule is an effective master-suppression technique. Anyone using the technique has laughter on his side while the person on the receiving end usually feels embarrassed and ashamed, or else deadly dull and without the slightest sense of humor. These feelings create in their turn a feeling of insecurity, which makes the individual woman flat and passive.

A woman who has learned to recognize this suppression technique can tell the person employing it, without feeling embarrassed or angry or boring, that she is not amused and that she demands that the objectionable practice cease forthwith.

3. Withholding Information

After the meeting: "Let's go out and have a beer," Larry suggests. "Fine," the other men join in. Sophie sighs; what she wants most is to go home. It's not like her to go to bars after every meeting. But if she doesn't come along, she knows exactly what will happen - at the next meeting the boys will have agreed on everything already, and she won't get a word in edgewise. It is not just a matter of drinking beer. They also exchange information and decide things in advance. So Sophie tags along. But why does it always have to be on their terms?



Withholding information occurs when men automatically take up matters only with other men. This way, they deny women access to information about important issues at work or in politics. At the same time, women's domestic efforts are disregarded.

To make good decisions, you need to know the facts of a case. Withholding information means keeping another person in the dark about certain things, thus preventing the person from acting as she would have had she known better.

There are plenty of "social occasions" which, through rules, tradition or the nature of the activity, allow men to meet without women being present - rotary meetings, intercompany football, drinking after work, the Thursday sauna with pea soup and punch.

At these formal or informal gatherings, people can reach agreement and make preliminary decisions without involving their women colleagues. These decisions then go through quickly and easily on the nod at board meetings and working groups, without the women present being able to do much about it.

There is a thoroughgoing systematic lack of knowledge about women's and girls' circumstances. Thus we know precious little of young girls' leisure problems, or of career women's unpaid work to create comfort and well-being both in the workplace and at home. These and other similar "gaps in our knowledge" prevent women from seeing clearly what is going on - in their local environment and in society in general.

Withholding information is a common master suppression technique. Women who are kept in ignorance feel lonely, insecure and stupid, making it easier for men to retain the initiative and for male culture to retain its dominant position.

By learning to recognize the "withholding technique," a woman understands that she has a right to demand more detailed background information and the tabling of certain matters for discussion when she finds this necessary. She can also see the value in women getting organized to acquire and exchange information on matters important for women and women's lives.

4. Damned If You Do And Damned If You Don't

Connie phones her parents to ask them if they will look after her son Matthew tonight. She can't miss an important union meeting.

"Don't you think you're spending an awful lot of time at meetings? You never have time for your son," her mother protests. Connie hears this every time they meet. Both of her parents think that she should simply stay at home to look after her son instead of running off to all those meetings. It's obvious that they think she is not a good mother. But once more they consent to look after Matthew.



At the meeting, Connie is asked to join a work group that meets every other Wednesday. "I'm sorry but I can't," Connie says. "I've promised my son I'll be home on Wednesdays."

Connie can tell that the others don't approve. In the hall, she overhears them talking about her: "Be with my son," one of them mocks. "I think the union is more important than babying one's kids! But that's just like a woman!"

Double punishment occurs when it's wrong if a woman does something - and wrong if she doesn't. This suppression technique is always used against the victims of prejudice and stereotypes. For instance, women in the feminist movement are blamed for the high divorce rate - and at the same time blamed for not being active enough in politics. "Damned if you do and damned if you don't!"

This technique is used against women so that they are accused of being bad mothers when they get involved in working life and politics - and for being "not with-it" and "switched-off" if they try to give priority to home and children.

In the same way, a female manager can be accused of weakness when she tries to listen and act democratically - and of lacking femininity when she shows her claws and forces her will through. And a female politician can be attacked for tunnel vision when she insists on women's interests and for being a traitor when she doesn't.

It is strange that the double bind is such an effective master suppression technique. It is manifestly illogical and unjust! But centuries of making women and female culture invisible and ridiculing either or both, do make even the strictest logician go soft. Meantime, women exposed to this master suppression technique, become stressed out when they try without much success to avoid attracting criticism from either side.

The double bind is extremely unpleasant for the constant guilty conscience and feelings of inadequacy it often brings. To avoid such unpleasantness, a woman can abstain from getting politically involved or from having children. She can accept an inferior position at work, and she can try her utmost to adapt to and balance the conflicting demands made on her.

It is important to learn to recognize this fourth master-suppression technique. Women, like men, are needed everywhere: at work, in politics, and with their children. And women must have the right and opportunity to combine different types of involvement without physical and mental burnout.

5. Heaping Blame and Putting to Shame

At a meeting, Corina suggests changing the meetings to make the atmosphere more pleasant: "Let's meet without a fixed agenda now and then, and take turns baking cakes for the meetings." "What the heck are you talking about?" Carl moans exasperatedly. "We don't meet here to nibble on cakes, nor to ramble on about nothing. Of all the things I've heard this really tops it! We're supposed to be serious here!"

"But it's always the same people who speak at the meetings, so I just thought we could try to change our style a bit, and then it would..." Carl breaks in: "Well, it's certainly not my fault that some people won't speak up. Why don't they go and take a course in public speaking? After all, this is not a nursery school!" Corina feels stupid. Maybe it was a dumb suggestion. What will they think of her after this?



Blame and shame are inflicted through ridicule and double punishment. It occurs when women are told that they are not good enough even if the reason for being "not good enough" may be: (1) that they think and behave differently from men and in novel ways, or (2) that they haven't had access to the information that men have controlled.

It is well known that women who have been raped or ill-treated feel deeply ashamed and partly responsible for what has happened.

The fifth master-suppression technique - heaping blame and putting to shame - is illogical and difficult to comprehend. At the same time, this master-suppression technique is effective on account of the inferior status society has assigned to women and female culture. By being made invisible day in and day out, the woman feels small and insignificant; through the accustomed ridicule, she feels silly; and through the systematic withholding of information, she feels insecure and stupid: These factors feed the serious - but wholly unjustified - feelings of shame, and feed the similarly groundless tendency to accept the blame for all the world's ills.

Thus, women do not protest as loudly as they should do when it is suggested that rape is committed because women wear short skirts, when women are blamed for the men's boozing, or when women are branded impossible to work with if they refuse to have their bottoms patted.

Heaping blame and putting to shame is more diffuse and harder to identify. It is therefore a matter of urgency to bring this out in the open. Such consciousness will have the power to explode all myths.

When a woman has learnt to recognize the fifth master-suppression technique, she can more easily handle and counteract the "psychology" that makes the technique effective, i.e., it persuades women themselves to "accept" the picture of women and female as something uninteresting, stupid and ludicrous.

But when women gains a complete understanding of the technique and what makes it work, instead of guilt and shame, they will be able to feel joy and pride in belonging to the so-called second sex.

This text was originally published in a booklet by the Institute of Women's Studies at St. Scholastica's College in Manila, the Philippines. The following text served as an introduction to the booklet:

Publisher's Note

I met Berit Ås in a women's conference in Sigtuna, Sweden several years ago. I stayed in her house in Oslo during a visit to Norway. She spent the month of January 1999 in the Philippines as the guest of the Institute of Women's Studies. These encounters have given me a glimpse of the influence of Berit Ås as a vintage feminist on women of the Scandinavian countries. One of the reasons for this influence is the dissemination in print and video of her work on the Five Master Suppression Techniques which is described in this booklet.

The five master suppression techniques are the methods used by men consciously or unconsciously to make women passive, submissive and repressed. When women become conscious of these techniques, they are rendered harmless - they lose their power as soon as women become aware of them.

Hopefully, this booklet will make more and more women aware of these suppression techniques in their daily life and therefore liberate themselves from forces that oppress them.

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A master suppression technique is the tool a person uses to exercise power over someone else. Learning to recognize the five techniques will help a woman:

1. to realize that it is not actually she who is boring, stupid and ridiculous - even though it feels like it,
2. to understand that the master suppression techniques can and should be combatted, and
3. to get discussion going - in the workplace, in the family, among colleagues in the world of politics - so that both men and women realize the need to reevaluate woman's way of thinking, speaking, and solving problems.

Two Worlds, Two Cultures

Men and women still live in vastly different worlds. This is because we are assigned different roles and expectations at school, in the family, at work and in politics.

If we compare men and women we observe the following:

- Men and women use language differently. We use different words, we construct sentences differently, and we talk about quite different matters.
- Men own more and earn considerably more than women. This still applies even when we carry out the same sort of work
- Men are active in powerful organizations and women do "good works."
- Men plan their time. Women's time is controlled to a great extent by men's plans.
- The differences are so big that we can speak of dealing with two different cultures: a male "front rank culture" which is well known, visible, obvious and highly respected, and a female culture which is less "visible" and carries on its existence in the shadow of the dominant male culture.

It is always an advantage to belong to the dominant culture in a society. One can decide that motorways are more important than nursery schools, and one can get a button sewn on a shirt without needing to feel all that grateful.

Since men still have more influence in our society than women - in spite of all efforts at equality - we can assume that there are ways and techniques that men have developed - consciously or unconsciously to ensure their power over women and female culture.

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