

# **Domination techniques: what they are and how to combat them**

*Author: The Centre for Gender Equality, Norway*

## **Position of power and domination techniques**

Power is the ability, quality or state of being able to get someone else to do something you want done, or the ability to make things happen or get things done the way you want performing physical, legal or mental skills. That power is a structured part of our economies and systems of political and social organisation; it forms part of the core of religion, family, forms of play, and intellectual life.

Power and privilege are not distributed evenly across race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, or sexual orientation. Many strategies are used consciously and unconsciously to maintain power and privileges; one strategy is the use of domination techniques. The five domination techniques that we shall talk about today are methods often used by men to make women passive, submissive and repressed. When we become aware of these techniques they'll lose their power.

## **Domination techniques**

The use of domination techniques is nothing new, and it is one of many means which the dominant employ to maintain power. This does not mean that men use these techniques only. Both men and women make use of them. The stronger use them against the weaker.

Today however, we are focusing on several techniques which men use to suppress women. Domination techniques are used wherever there is power and influence; in politics, organisational life, at work, in the mass media, at school and in the educational sector, and in the more private circles.

For example men participate more in debates than women do. This does not mean that women have no opinions. On the contrary, it may mean that women are ignored, undervalued, bullied, ridiculed, left out and marginalised. Not on the odd occasion, but continually. To be exposed to such techniques of domination is unlikely to do

much for self-confidence. Domination techniques get us to believe that there is something wrong with us, that we are stupid. They weaken our belief in ourselves.

Learning to recognise the five techniques will help a woman:

1. to realise that it is not actually she who is boring, stupid and ridiculous – even though it feels like it,
2. to understand that the techniques of domination can and should be combated, and
3. to get discussion going – in the workplace, in the family, among colleges in the world of politics – so that both women and men realise the need to re-evaluate women’s way of thinking, speaking and solving problems.

To identify techniques of domination and to give them a name is one of the ways of rendering them harmless. Therefore it is important to learn to expose them, but it is also important that one avoid using them.

### **1. Making invisible**

*Example:*

*Elisabeth is sitting in a meeting in the local government. It is her first meeting and she has 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 Elisabeth starts talking. It’s easy to see that he is used to this role. He pounds the table for emphasis, speaks loudly, and goes on and on. There’s no doubt about – here is someone who knows what he is talking about and he dares anyone to disagree! It’s Elisabeth’s turn. She quickly presents what she wanted to say. It doesn’t take long. She feels like her speech sounded just as a little peep. But now it is done. She waits for their response. But nothing comes. The meeting just rolls along as if she hasn’t said a thing. Elisabeth feels terrible. “Did I say something inappropriate or stupid?” she ponders. “I should never 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.

Have you every experienced that:

- the leader of a meeting passed over you when you asked to speak?
- you were not called to speak in a meeting, or at work, or in private life?
- nobody followed up and commented on what you said?
- matters that you raised were not reported, either in the minutes or in the mass media?

Or have you noticed how few women are pictured in the mass media, not to mention all those women left out of the history books? From time to time, it seems that women are completely omitted from men's memories and awareness when setting up committees and commissions. We often get to hear that this is quite by chance but the situation recurs too often to be just coincidental. How do you think men would react if time after time they were marginalised? Of course at the very least, they would speak out, and that is what we women must do too.

Making someone invisible can sometimes be difficult to discern because it often happens “without words”. It is expressed through body language, for instance gestures or the lack of them. Notice how some people read papers when women are speaking, chat quietly to each other, yawn, roll their eyes at each other, wander around the room, collect something to drink, in fact do everything but listen. They divert their attention from you and play on the immediate emotional reactions of the meeting. You can well call for quiet in the room or stop and look at the meeting until you have its attention. If there is no sound from the rostrum, everybody will look up to find out what is happening.

Many women have experience of not being listened to, that others are not catching what is being said. Sometimes this may be related to the fact that women put down their names to speak towards the end of a debate and new points of view and new elements are seen as untimely.

On other occasions things you say are ignored and given no attention because you are a woman. What you say is not considered important. So it is not so surprising that most women keep quiet in meetings.

It is difficult to pass on good advice but in any event, try to avoid excusing yourself or showing unjustified insecurity. You can come right out and say that nobody has commented on what you said and ask them what they think.

By learning to recognise this domination 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**

*Example:*

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

This is ridicule. Of course we are good-humoured and we can laugh at ourselves. It is not the good, old fashioned leg-pulling that we are talking about.

Laughter can be very discomfoting for the person bearing the brunt of it and often a collective ridiculing of women is involved. Laughter may well be caused by fantasies and prejudices created by men, for example: "When the old girl's reached 40, I'm going to exchange her for two 20 year olds."

Women are often ridiculed at meetings. If we see women being subjected to ridicule in this way, we must react.

Ridicule is an effective technique of domination. 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 humour. These feelings create in their turn a feeling of insecurity, which makes the individual women flat and passive.

A woman who has learned to recognise 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 of information**

*Example:*

*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 have get a word in edgewise. It is not just a matter of drinking bear. They also change information and decide things in advance. So Sophia 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. Particularly in political spheres we know that information is exchanged, opinions formed and decisions taken in restricted circles, like for example, when the boys go for a beer/drink after a meeting, are out for a “business dinner”, play football or quite frankly, pass information to one another before meetings. Women are not invited into these restricted circles or, purely and simply; women just do not have the same opportunities to join in. It often happens that women have to go home to relieve the baby-sitter instead of participating. Moreover, few women know that such consultations take place.

Men have a network of informal channels of information where they update each other in a fairly open way, while women, broadly speaking, have to be grateful to get filtered information. It is a game played among the most active but it is seldom that women are accorded such confidence.

Withholding information is a common technique of domination. 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. But again, men might be unaware that their communication systematically excludes women.

By learning to recognise 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 it necessary.

It is also important that women also set up network groups and prepare themselves jointly before meetings. In this way, we can take up the fight when it appears that everything has already been decided before the start of the meeting.

#### **4. Double punishment**

*Example:*

*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 are 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 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 workgroup that meets every other Wednesday. "I am sorry but I can't," Connie says. "I have 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!"*

If a woman and mother goes out to work and is perhaps active in union work and politics as well, she is told that her husband and children are being neglected, that activities are at the expense of the family, that she is just thinking about herself, etc. Women also are told how lucky they are to have such clever and understanding husbands. Unfortunately, it is often women who heap this double punishment on each other. This we must avoid.

Whatever you do, it's wrong. Double punishment occurs when it's wrong if a woman does something – and wrong if she doesn't. This domination technique is used against the victims of prejudices and stereotypes. For example, women in the feminist movement are blamed for a high divorce rate – at the same time blamed for not being active enough in politics. "Damned if you do and damned if you don't." In the same way, a female manager can be accused of weakness when she tries to listen and act democratically – and a lacking of 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 not difficult to make women feel guilty or disgraced. Bad conscience and feelings of inadequacy are the faithful companions of women. Not because we don't know what we are reasonably capable of achieving, but because we all have expectations, prejudices, fantasies and norms that always make us feel that we should manage better than we do. Bad conscience towards our children, husband/partner, family, colleagues and friends characterises us. We have the least bad conscience towards ourselves.

Being subjected to this technique 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 try to accept an inferior position at work, and she can try her utmost to adapt to and balance the conflicting demands made on her. It's therefore important to learn to recognise this domination 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**

*Example:*

*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 ramble on about nothing. Off all of the things I have 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 not being "not good enough" may be: (1) that they think they behave differently from men and in novel ways, or (2) that they haven't had access to the information that men have controlled.

This domination technique is illogical and difficult to comprehend. At the same time this 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 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.

How many ill-treated women do not feel that it was really their own fault? Was it not she who provoked the man - should she perhaps not have said or done precisely what she did? And what about women who have been raped? How many times have they heard that they invited the assault, or should have realised etc. Generally speaking, we are in the wrong place at the wrong time. We have wiggled our bottoms and dressed in plunging necklines - and so we are fair game. If anything happens, then it is our own fault. But in any case, surely it cannot possibly be our fault? For all that, this view is widespread and also among those who dispense justice. Women are reluctant to submit to interrogation and police investigation. It is like going through the whole rape again, they say. Surely we cannot possibly be responsible for assaults against our own bodies by others? We must work determinedly on our feelings of guilt and shame. We are oppressed by them. It is a task that we must solve together. A precondition is that we do not bring guilt and shame on other women.

Heaping blame and putting to shame is more diffuse and harder to identify. It persuades women themselves to "accept" the picture of women and female as something uninteresting, stupid and ludicrous. It's 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 recognise this technique, she can more easily handle the "psychology" that makes the technique effective. 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.

### **Pirating proposals**

Every now and again women discover that men repeat their recommendations and comments and receive praise and recognition for doing so. The woman sits back and does not know how to handle the situation properly.

You are entitled to feeling rather bitter that it never became evident that it was your idea originally. But many women feel the issue is more important. It does not matter

so much whether they remember that I was the first to raise it. But you should worry about it. The ideas were yours and you should have the credit for it and others must know that you were the first to put the issue forward. Situations like this play their part in political careers. Perhaps next time they will listen to you and give some consideration to your views?

It is often difficult to comment on such events oneself and that is why women should be attentive when other women are speaking. If you notice that others are pirating women's proposals, you ought to comment on the fact, e.g. by mentioning "the proposal that Eva originally put forward," or something similar.

### **Underrating and insults**

A variation of verbal bullying is when a person tactically and deliberately underrates your ability to understand, or insults you.

Do not let expressions like "you don't understand," haven't grasped the point," "contradict yourself," etc. floor you. It may well be that the person in question has not articulated himself clearly or has totally failed to listen to you.

Examples of verbal bullying may also be:

Can't you take a joke, my girl?

What do you think about that, my friend?

You look lovely when you're angry!

Perhaps you have also experienced that the leader of the meeting or speakers in the debate adopt a patronising father child approach to you, for example: "Didn't you realise that my girl?" This is a way of disarming and neutralising us that we should be aware of.

It is best to ignore such comments unless you have a humorous and forceful retort ready. As a rule, the forceful replies come to mind after it is too late to say them.

## **Interruptions**

Men find it easy to monopolise conversations and debates. An American survey showed that men made 90% of interruptions. Women are subjected to more interruptions than men are.

If you are interrupted, you must let it be known that you have not finished. Ask to be allowed to finish and observe that you were interrupted. Keep on the offensive and do not withdraw as long as you have something to say. If there is any small talk in the room, wait until there is quiet. It will then be the interrupter who feels uneasy and discourteous not you.

## **Why do men use domination techniques?**

Males may clearly reinforce and maintain male privilege by their use of space and language. Males may also assert power and expect to be treated more favourably than females. In some situations, men may express their resentment that women are there at all, stating that they are “taking a place away from a man”.

It is not only inequalities of power that leads to domination techniques, but a conscious or often unconscious sense of entitlement to privilege. The techniques are often the logical outcome of men’s sense of entitlement to certain privileges. If a man beats his wife for not having dinner on the table right on time, it is not only to make sure that it doesn’t happen again, but is an indication of his sense of entitlement to be waited on.

## **Summarise - What to do?**

### **1. Discern domination techniques at meetings, seminars, conferences etc.**

Is someone using domination techniques to suppress you or other persons in the group? When you know the different types of techniques it is easier to recognise them. Put a name on the suppression. Knowing domination techniques helps you to realise that it is not actually you who are boring, stupid and ridiculous – even though it feels like it - there’s nothing wrong with you or the things you talk about. Have self-confidence that your impression of the situation is the correct one.

### **2. Tell someone about the suppression.**

They can give you support when you confront the oppressor. Solidarity is important. What convinces one that one is being subjected to domination techniques is the number of people who recognise the signs and who are familiar with the situation but have not been able to put a name on it before.

### **3. Confront the person(s) that use domination techniques.**

Explain thoroughly why you feel subjected to a domination technique. Remember that these techniques can be used unconsciously. It is important to make the users of the techniques aware of the situation as early as possible. You might get accused of being self-centred.

*This paper was given as a lecture for the Union of Women's Organizations of Macedonia, April 2001, by the Centre for Gender Equality, Norway. For further information on this issue, please contact us: Centre for Gender Equality, P.O. Box 8049 Dep, N-0031 Oslo. Tlf: +47 22 24 25 71. Fax: +47 22 24 95 21. Email: [postmottak@likestilling.no](mailto:postmottak@likestilling.no)*