

# MELLEMFOLKELIGT SAMVIRKE **act:onaid**

**Training Guide to Master Suppression Techniques and Counter Strategies**

# Master suppression techniques and Counter Strategies

## *Methods for dealing with power structures in social interactions*



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## INTRODUCTION

### Master suppression techniques and the concept of Power

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Master suppression techniques are strategies of social manipulation used, unconsciously or consciously, to maintain power and suppress people in social relations. Power exists in every social relation, not only between e.g. parent and child, police and criminal, boss and employee or teacher and student, but also between friends, colleagues or family members. In every social relation, a negotiation of power will take place. The suppression techniques may illustrate unequal power relations and are connected to structural discrimination and inequality in society. They can be used by anyone, but are most - and most effectively - used by people with more power against people with less power<sup>1</sup>. A training in dealing with master suppression techniques can be considered a norm critical approach, with the purpose to raise awareness of how the norm and majority in societies affect our way of understanding different minority positions.

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<sup>1</sup> People with more power refers to the privileged, not deviant from the norm, those defining what is right, wrong and normal. Those with less power, refers to individuals and groups that continuously meet suppression, and who in general have less access to well paid jobs, good housing, political power etc. See also more on [intersectionality](#) and on structural [discrimination](#).

## Examples of workshops where master-suppression techniques can be used

The master-suppression techniques are most commonly used in trainings on discrimination issues - based on either ethnicity, culture, religion, gender or sexual orientation. This document will elaborate on inspiration for three possible training focus areas:

- A feminist/gender position training
  - An anti-racism training
  - A conflict management training.
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- A master suppression technique workshop on *gender positions and feminism* could for instance deal with situations where men belittle (e.g. calling women honey or sweetie), ignore or exclude female colleagues from important work related information - often unintentionally, as a result of an unconscious assumption that a woman is less capable as a leader or colleague in certain positions. It could also focus on how women and men themselves correct each other (unconsciously) to fit into the norms of how “real women” or “real men” are supposed to act and behave.<sup>2</sup>
  - A master suppression technique workshop on *racial, ethnic or cultural positions*, could deal with situations where white people attribute specific traits to a person of color or a person with a minority ethnical background, or assuming, that a muslim colleague/person acts or thinks in certain stereotypical ways.
  - In a master suppression technique workshop on *conflict management* it is relevant to emphasize the role of the concept of power in the escalation of conflict. It can be used to understand a person’s sense of feeling suppressed or discriminated, in situations where it otherwise may not be completely obvious, or difficult to put into words. It may help to analyze situations where conflict has escalated, and further clarify how hidden power structures<sup>3</sup> in society and between individuals affect our way of acting and interacting with each other. It gives tools to deal with concrete situations, in order to prevent escalation of conflicts in the future. It is especially relevant if working with

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<sup>2</sup> Be aware that a feminist approach should not function as an anti men “campaign”. *Nonetheless*, on a structural level, men have more access to power and privileges. So, although men also experience social exclusion or being invisibilized, women are more likely to experience this. The point with a feminist training is not shaming men, but showing how power is distributed unequally. To nuance a training or discussion it may be useful to include an [intersectionality](#) perspective, that focus on the many cross cutting categories men and women may be discriminated and judged upon. Also you may include a discussion of [local hierarchies](#), which is about power in a separate space that may differ from the majority or norm.

<sup>3</sup> Hidden power structures refers to the invisible, informal and unspoken, unequal access to power in society, which shows in different access to privileges (i.e. easy access to money, good jobs, people who are ‘allowed’ everywhere without being identified as different and less valuable than the norm). The structures are hidden as it is spoken of as ‘we all have equal access and rights’, ‘it is your own fault if not’. The unrevealing of these structures may happen through this form of training, and may also include statistics from the specific context. Also, be aware that the structures are often more hidden for the oppressing majority, than for the oppressed minority who experience it in their lives. It is therefore normal that the oppressor do not immediately believe it is valid and important.

people from diverse backgrounds, or where majority/minority issues cause discomfort or conflict.

The main objective in any workshop, no matter the specific target group or theme, is to raise awareness of and transform power structures and promote equality through working with the counter strategies and validation techniques presented below.

The idea of a training is therefore not only to show how and when the suppression techniques take place, but ideally also to work on alternative strategies for (re)acting, and through this promoting genuine and sustainable change in social climates. The trainings should be used to understand how people can relate to each other without (consciously or unconsciously) resorting to oppression (Stockholm University, 2004).

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## ☑ BACKGROUND ON MASTER SUPPRESSION TECHNIQUES

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Master suppression techniques were first defined and categorized by the Norwegian politician, feminist and professor in social psychology, Berit Aas. The oppression patterns were according to Aas (1978) “*methods employed to obtain or maintain negative power over other people, or ways to assert oneself by oppressing other individuals*” (Stockholm University, 2004).

Aas was indignant by her experiences as a female politician in a male-dominated political arena. She was the first female elected to the Norwegian parliament and she saw how the other male MPs were inattentive when she spoke, took decisions at informal meetings where she was not invited and in other ways excluded her from influence. She made a categorization of the practices she experienced and it became the master suppression/ruler techniques. She saw these methods, as a both intentional and unintentional way of men to gain power over - and to suppress women (Stockholm University, 2004).

The five techniques she defined were *Invizibilising*, *Ridiculing*, *Withholding Information*, *Damned If You Do Damned If You Don't*, and *Heaping Blame and Putting to Shame*. Later several more techniques were added, and the concept was also used to describe and analyze social interactions in other unequal power relations than gender.

The concept can be defined as rooted in racism, or discrimination based on gender, nationality, culture or sexual orientation. The concept of master suppression techniques is also used in USA, UK, Sweden etc. under the term ‘micro-aggressions’ or ‘ruler-techniques’. For more background on master suppression techniques, structural racism and discrimination and the, read [here](#).

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## THE FIRST FIVE MASTER SUPPRESSION TECHNIQUES

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The first five master techniques will shortly be elaborated below - for more on each of the suppression techniques and its counter strategies and validation techniques read in google folder [here](#) and [here](#). See also examples of [sketches/role plays](#).

1. **Invisiblizing** conveys the message that the target do not exist, and that his/her presence and actions are of no value or importance. It may be expressed through speech, body language or other social codes e.g. the target's name is never mentioned, the target's name is not introduced, or while he/she talks; people talk, cough, look down into their papers, scrape their chairs or simply do not respond to what you say. Whether it is intentional or unintentional, due to habit or ignorance, the target may feel insignificant and insecure.
2. **Ridiculing** conveys a lack of equality. A person ridiculing another dominates the situation and reduces the target to a figure of fun. Being the target of this ruler technique, one may find it difficult to feel taken seriously. Being put in the situation of "it is only a joke" makes it hard to distance oneself from the situation and saying it is not okay. Often ridicule belittles a person and results in a feeling of powerlessness, but may in some cases also result in escalation of conflict or violence.
3. **Withholding information** illustrates when people hold back information from another person or a group. When not having access to relevant information of e.g. written communication, news, invitations or minutes of a meeting, it may lead to incorrect or delayed response from the person who is excluded from the information. An example is how a group of colleagues may have discussed and decided on a certain topic over a beer after work, and when the actual meeting is taking place, the decisions are pushed through without much further inclusion of those not present at the informal meeting.
4. **Damned if you do, damned if you don't** conveys the idea that whatever choice a person makes, it is wrong. A person being target of this double-bind ruler technique may feel that e.g.: *"if you're outspoken, people say you're too dominating, and if you're a good listener, you're dismissed as being weak. If you channel most of your efforts into work, you're accused of neglecting your children or your partner, and if things are the other way around, you're told you lack drive"* (Stockholm University,

2004: 11). Indirectly or directly, it expresses a negative attitude toward any choice the person makes.

- 5. Heaping blame and putting to shame** refers to making a person feel ashamed and guilty for an action, a trait, a certain development or a situation, even though this person is not to blame. It is harder to identify than the three first suppression techniques, and it is closely related to the fourth. Furthermore, it characterizes all of the previous categories of suppression techniques, as they all refer to making people feel ashamed or wrong on some level. When people relive the situations exemplified above over and over again, they internalize the message of blame and feel guilty and ashamed. For example, women feel guilty because they are unable to finish their tasks, instead of critically considering their work situation, or they are made to feel guilty for being raped or abused as they are told their clothes or behaviour caused/provoked the abuse.

#### **How to present the master suppression techniques and counter strategies:**

When presenting the techniques in training, the first step is to create awareness of the **master suppression/ruler techniques** by giving concrete examples of situations where these occur, often unintentionally and in hidden power structures between people.

The second step is to give the tool to react and call attention to the uncomfortable situation, by using the **counter strategies**. These provide concrete examples on how to respond, while staying calm and keeping yourself respected. The counter strategies may put much pressure on the oppressed, but is often needed as the oppressor are not necessarily aware of the consequences of their actions and behavior. Note here that counter strategies are also, if not more, a responsibility of observers and people present when the suppression technique is acted out (see more on this below in ‘Notes for trainers’).

The third step (**validation techniques**) illustrates how to take responsibility by your own example, and thereby creating a social climate in which the oppressive techniques are not used. The idea with the alternative reaction strategies is thereby to promote genuine and sustainable change in social climates (Stockholm University, 2004).

See also **Handout and overview of all [ten Master suppression techniques, Counter strategies and Validation techniques](#)**.



## *COURSE STRUCTURE - THE STEPS OF A TYPICAL WORKSHOP*

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*ESTIMATED DURATION: 2-3 HOURS*

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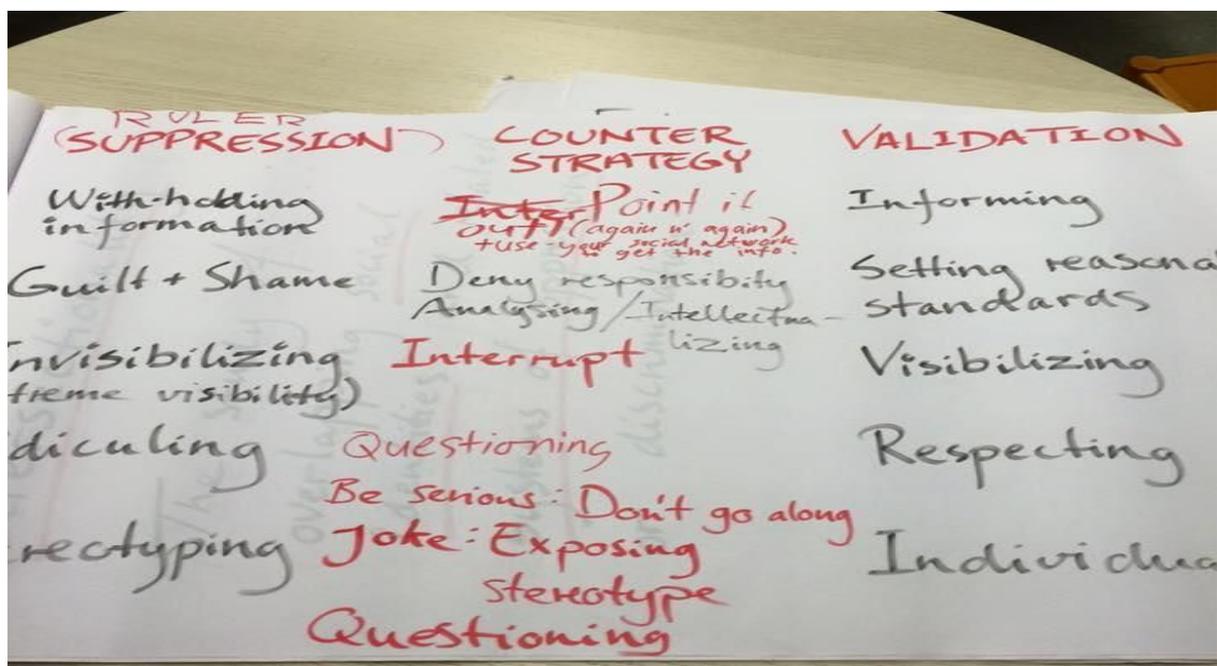
1. **Personal stories:** Start by telling two personal stories – this will connect the audience with the topic emotionally, which is crucial for allowing the participants to open up for talking about sensitive issues. The personal stories should illustrate an experience you have had in relation to the workshop context. It may be where you yourself have experienced being subjected to a master suppression technique, or where you have unintentionally exposed others to it.
2. **Listing the techniques:** Briefly list the five-ten master suppression techniques – just the headlines – don't go into details. Also consider which master suppression techniques are specifically relevant to the topic and context of your training.
3. **Sketches and discussions:** Start with the sketches and get the participants to analyze them. This will be the main part of the workshop. It is useful to combine this part of the workshop with reflection supported by a flip chart overview of the master suppression techniques in play (see table below). The sketches should be based on the lived reality of the target group and topic of the workshop.
4. **Debriefing** with participants may be done at the end of the workshop, but using the sketches as a method should lead to reflection and debriefing on each master suppression technique throughout the workshop.



*Sketches, Forum theatre and participant discussion*

The methods used in training to illustrate the master suppression techniques are mainly sketches but also forum theatre.

Before the training starts, fill out part of a table (see below), while keeping some of the counter strategy - and validation technique boxes blank (depending on your target group, decide what is most relevant to leave blank and discuss. Leaving the counter strategy boxes blank will usually allow for more reflection and discussion). Show the sketches you have prepared one by one, while discussing and relating it to the table: Point out the suppression technique and include the participants in a brainstorm on either counter strategy or validation technique. You can also choose to give the participants the [handout](#) with the overview of all ten master suppression techniques.



Forum theatre may be used to include the participants in the illustration of a situation, while discussing how different social positions may change the whole power relation in a situation (what would happen if this person was female, a person of color, white etc.). Also it could be used to test suggestions from the audience, and start discussion on what could work. Depending on the target group and if time allows it, you may ask the participants to develop and play out sketches, and let the other participants guess the master suppression techniques, and discuss (and act out) counter strategies and/or validation techniques.

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**OTHER RELEVANT EXERCISES, THEMES AND CONCEPT DEFINITIONS**  
**(LINKS TO GOOGLE FOLDER)**

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- [Definitions of relevant concepts and brief descriptions to be used in training](#)
- [Handout: all ten suppression techniques, counter strategies and validation techniques](#)
- [Sketch/role play examples](#) (open for new examples from trainers!)
- [Tolerate on you exercise - \(how does it feel to be discriminated on\)](#)
- [Privilege walk/ power walk](#)
- [Red card-White card: Exercise illustrating structural and institutional racism](#)
- [Session and exercise on Intersectionality](#)



**NOTES TO FACILITATOR**

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- Consider doing needs assessment-interviews before developing the workshop in order to identify key challenges and specific experiences of the target group. Consider using the findings to develop sketches that are directly linked to their life experience or context. If you are using a personal story for a sketch, always ask for permission without putting any pressure.
- Avoid blaming or creating guilt and shame. A training is not about pointing fingers at specific people or groups. Always make sure to handle the situation so that everyone feels respected and dignified. Point to power structures in society, and not to the individuals, and focus on how we have a possibility to change and take responsibility for social interactions in our daily lives.
- Be aware that presenting and discussing the counter strategies may provoke some participants, especially those who are often exposed to them: “why is it my responsibility to all the time confront and school people about the negative consequences of *their* bad behavior?” It is not ideal and it is putting a lot of pressure on the oppressed. Ideally we should only be talking about the validation techniques, but the master suppression techniques will often be invisible for the people with

power, or the “oppressor”. Therefore counter strategies are necessary. But, counter strategies should not only be applied by the oppressed, but also (and ideally most often), by people that are present when the suppression technique is acted out. In this way we all have a responsibility to be aware of and (re)act on master suppression techniques.

- Be aware that working with topics like racism or feminism, may provoke opposition, denial, discussion, uncomfortable situations and critical questions. This aspect calls for the facilitator to familiarize themselves with background and definitions on related themes such as racism, structural racism and structural discrimination. Follow links in this document to short introductions to relevant concepts and further background literature. It is not necessary to present *all* these concepts, rather it is important to be well prepared to be able to raise awareness and discuss on a constructive and informative level. It is always useful to be prepared with realistic examples on specific situations where the master suppression techniques happens.



**CONTEXT AND TARGET GROUPS :**

***FEMINIST TRAINING, ANTI RACISM TRAINING AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TRAINING***

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**MASTER SUPPRESSION TECHNIQUES IN FEMINIST TRAINING**

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*“Women "chatter" and "gossip" , they're referred to with words such as hag, whore, slut ... hysterical. Jokes reproduce this atmosphere of ridicule by comparing women to hens, cows, dogs, etc. The number of derisive words for women appears to be greater than that for men. Unfortunately, women have a tendency to belittle themselves as well with expressions such as "I'm such a ditz!", "Silly me!", or "How could I be so stupid?" (Stockholm University, 2004)*

*Inspiration for sketch topics (see more sketch examples [here](#)):*

- Two girls talking: one tells the other of an uncomfortable experience at her workplace where male colleagues have harassed her, commenting on her short dress. After saying how she feels like an object and doesn't like it, the other one reacts by diminishing her experience saying "you know how men are, don't take it so seriously, maybe you should think more about what you wear" etc.

Master suppression technique: *ridiculing, heaping of guilt and shame* (it is your own fault, not the men).

- A meeting at a workplace, where a female leader or colleague is not taken seriously, as male colleagues might talk, make “women” jokes about her, or say how nice she looks in a dress.

Master suppression technique: *Ridiculing* (instead of being taken serious, she is flirted or joked with, *invisibilizing*, *damned if you do/damned if you don't* (e.g. flirted with if you are extrovert, being told you are prissy or prudish if you are shy).

- A man in the global south is by a family member pressured to be strong, “manly” and the savior or “the main earner” of the family, or a ten year old is asked by family member to protect his sister who is 20 years old while at the same time told to be tough as “men are not allowed to cry and show emotions”.

Master suppression technique: *damned if you do*, *damned if you don't*, *blame and guilt*, *stereotyping* (For example if he is told by a family member, “how” to be manly, but also blamed for not expressing what he really feels).

*Target group challenges and common reactions from participants:*

- *A training with both men and women, or only men:* Men might show resistance to accepting certain aspects of discussing patriarchy. It might be useful to include examples that illustrate the negative consequences for men i.e. how stereotypical male ideals also dictate how men are supposed to act, behave, dress etc., which exclude men when they do not fit into these norms. In the global south make sure to include an understanding of the pressure on the men in relation to how they sexually are supposed to act towards women, and not being allowed to cry or show emotions, resulting in “emotionally castration”. These are examples on how the structures affects the male position in a complex and negative way.

It is important to be aware that a feminist approach should not function as an anti-men “campaign”. Nonetheless, on a structural level, men have more access to power and privileges than women. So, although men also experience social exclusion or being invisibilized, women are more likely to experience this. The point with a feminist training is not shaming men, but showing how the power structures are distributed unequally<sup>4</sup>. Also, include examples that shows how women themselves positions themselves and each other in less favorable situations, as a result of how power historically have been distributed.

- In some contexts, some participants might show resistance to the relevance of feminism and fighting inequality between men and women in today’s modern society.

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<sup>4</sup> To nuance a training or discussion it may be useful to include an [intersectionality](#) perspective, that focus on the many cross cutting categories men and women may be discriminated and judged upon, and local [hierarchies](#) that explains how those on top of power may also be put in situations where they feel powerless.

Be prepared to give examples and facts on the veracity of structural discrimination against women (read more [here](#)).

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## MASTER SUPPRESSION TECHNIQUES IN ANTI RACISM TRAINING

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An Anti racism training may cover and focus on different topics e.g. minority/majority positions, ethnic, religious or nationality divisions, white awareness training etc. An anti racism training is based on the concept of structural racism and everyday racism, meaning the subtle and often unintentional discrimination that happens in everyday situations (rather than direct and open actions of racism) based on skin colour, religion, ethnicity, nationality or cultural background. For definitions on everyday racism, structural discrimination, structural racism and neo racism (the latter refers to the dominant racism of today that focuses not only on skin colour but also ethnicity, religion and culture) read [here](#). In this document you will also find inspiration for models and short precise definitions that can be used in training.

*Inspiration for sketch topics (see more sketch examples [here](#)):*

- A white person calls a person of colour a discriminating word or attributes traits to the person of colour due to his/her origin (due to stereotypical ideas, i.e. Chinese people are all industrious, African people are all good dancers etc. When the person of color reacts to it, he/she is told “not to take it so seriously, it is only a joke, don’t be so politically correct” etc.

Master suppression technique: *ridiculing, stereotyping<sup>5</sup> and guilt and shame*, as the person of colour is made to feel ashamed of taking it seriously.

- In the workplace: Colleagues go for a beer and don’t ask out and inform the muslim colleague, assuming that he/she doesn’t drink beer, and therefore is not interested in going out with the colleagues.

Master suppression technique: *withholding information, stereotyping*.

*Target group challenges and common reactions from participants:*

- *A training with all white people:* some white participants might show resistance to the word racism or have a blindspot for the seriousness of the problem. A common reaction from white people is that although they see how anyone may unintentionally act in discriminating ways, many oppose calling it racism. They may think that racism is only explicit racist actions - something from the past or from radical environments - rather than a structural problem in society. It can be difficult to understand why well meaning actions may have very negative consequences. Be sure to be able to define concepts of racism, structural racism, neo racism and everyday racism. For more on these topics read [here](#).

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<sup>5</sup> See the overview of all ten master suppression techniques

- *A training with mixed ethnicities or nationalities:* Be aware that an ethnic group or higher caste might be reluctant to discuss their own privileges or prejudices. This may also be true for other otherwise oppressed groups. For example white gay men only see their oppression but find it hard to acknowledge their whiteness and gender brings some privilege. The same goes for working class people.
- *A training with mainly white and few colored people or mainly colored people and few white:* Be aware that talking about racism may be awkward and uncomfortable for the few. Be open for whatever position (participating or observing) the few might take and always make sure to not create a hostile environment, to avoid blaming or pointing fingers - focus on the structural character of the topic.

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### MASTER SUPPRESSION TECHNIQUES IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TRAINING

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A conflict management training may include examples from both of the above feminist and antiracist trainings, depending on the specific context of the training. Compared to traditional conflict management, this method is more critical as it focuses on how the different power positions of the participants may affect a possible conflict, rather than looking at a social relation as neutral. Consider including perspectives of [intersectionality](#)<sup>6</sup> that focus on how various cross-cutting social categories affect our privileges and power positions, and thereby the social relations we enter.

The purpose of a conflict management training is to provide tools for people who feel oppressed or compromised, and to empower them to deal with concrete situations. Furthermore, raising awareness of the master suppression techniques may support people in power positions to *not* apply the techniques.

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<sup>6</sup> Intersectionality is the study of overlapping social identities and related systems of discrimination and oppression. It deals with how people and groups have privileges and/or experience discrimination on the basis of many different social, economic and cultural categories (e.g. gender, nationality, religion, sexuality, color, ethnicity, age, education etc.), that influence and interact on each other. See exercise and background on intersectionality [here](#).

## Credits:

This Training Guide is developed with inspiration from Mads Ananda Lodahl's work on master suppression techniques and further the article *Validation techniques and counter strategies*, made by researchers and professors at Stockholm University (2004), who were inspired by norwegian feminist and professor Berit Aas.

Finally the training is build on experiences, observations and workshop scripts from several workshops done on master suppression techniques in the anti-racist and anti-discrimination field in the Mellemløst Samvirke platform in Denmark.

For more information on the work in Denmark contact project leader in the anti-racism and anti-discrimination field Malte Warburg Sørensen [mwa@ms.dk](mailto:mwa@ms.dk) or contact Training team Denmark on [kursus@ms.dk](mailto:kursus@ms.dk).

## References: ([see texts in google folder](#)):

Mira C. Skadegaard Thorsen: *'Strukturel Diskrimination i hverdagen'*, in *'Rettigheder, Empowerment og Læring'*: Bilfeldt, Jensen og Andersen: 2014 p. 160-183

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D. Amnéus, D. Eile, U. Flock, P. Steuer and G. Testad (2004), *Validation techniques and counter strategies* , Stockholm University

Mads Ananda Lodahl, *Dig og mig - om ulige magt og konsekvenserne af det*

Allan G. Johnson (2001): *Privilege, power and difference*, New York

Western States Centre: *Dismantling Racism: A resource book for social change groups*