

Working Life for Everyone podcast: Anukatariina Saloheimo

Interviewer: You are listening to Working Life for Everyone, a podcast where we broaden our horizons about the world of work and discuss the inequalities of the Finnish labour market with people who have dedicated their careers to doing something about them. My name is Jarkko Immonen, and I am one of the career counsellors at the University of Helsinki's Career Services.

Today we'll talk about the equality of gender and sexual minorities in the Finnish workplace and about related challenges. My guest today is Anukatariina Saloheimo, an instructor and activist. A warm welcome.

Anukatariina Saloheimo: Thank you.

Interviewer: You're involved in so many things. You run your own company, Havulintu, which offers equality training on sexual and gender minorities to employers in the healthcare sector. You are a career instructor in the Helsinki Pride community and also a long-time activist in, for example, the Seta association, and have drawn up, analysed and published numerous reports on equality. We'll discuss all this in just a moment. But first I would like to ask you how you're doing right now. What are you up to?

Anukatariina Saloheimo: Well, right now I'm busy, even as a pensioner. I'm not involved as an actual researcher, but I'm in the group behind a Nordic project on – surprise, surprise – discrimination against gender minorities in the workplace. I'm the chair of the Dreamwear Club, a transvestite and transfeminine organisation, preparing its autumn meeting. And preparations for the club's magazine are at a very hectic stage. As for activities this autumn, I'm passing the baton on to others to organise the TransHelsinki event. I've been in charge of it and am now handing it over to others. And then there's training.

Interviewer: Another interesting feature of your career path is that you didn't establish Havulintu until you retired. You previously had a long career in the university of applied sciences sector, as a teacher in the field of social services and healthcare. The career stories and images that surround us every day typically depict entrepreneurs as fairly young people. What has it been like to break new ground at this stage of your career?

Anukatariina Saloheimo: It's been quite a ride. I'm such a hardened public-sector employee, with no background as an entrepreneur. Though in my case, the entrepreneurial thing is fairly minimal. In practice, I've set up a business name to channel my wages or fees, and of

course I have a website and so on. And I do receive some inquiries that way too. It's a different perspective. Advertising myself, putting myself forward, it's been unfamiliar terrain to me until now, and I'm still not great at it.

Interviewer: I'm sure many listeners of this podcast feel the same about putting themselves forward and how difficult it is. But let's move on to the main topics of the day. As I said before, you do a lot of equality training in Finnish workplaces. What questions do people have, what do they ask you, what training needs are there in workplaces or, say, in the area of recruitment, related to the equality of gender and sexual minorities?

Anukatariina Saloheimo: There is a need to understand this whole thing, inclusion, so that all employees can feel that they are there as themselves, as single, valuable parts of the work community. It makes them thrive, and the work community also thrives. I'd say that's the key thing, the goal. And as far as the questions I get asked, some people are anxious about whether they know the terminology, whether they make a mistake or offend others who represent a minority. It's something I often hear. And of course what occurs in the workplace is, not actual discrimination, but non-inclusion, people talking in a normative way, assuming that others are straight and men and women, depending on what a midwife once assumed. To a person who doesn't represent that group, this type of talk sends the message that maybe I'm not included in the group, that my needs and my identity are not taken seriously.

Actually the mistakes people make are rarely serious. Especially if you notice it and call yourself out, say that this is a little strange and new to me. But of course if it keeps happening again and again, it's interpreted in practice as intentional. For instance, calling someone by their former first name when you know they have changed their name, that's gender harassment in practice. Sometimes even the first slip-up may hurt someone, because that someone has gone through this before, maybe it's the 1,001st time, so it breaks the camel's back for them. Sometimes that happens.

Interviewer: Are there differences in these needs, for instance regionally, or between the public and private sectors?

Anukatariina Saloheimo: Based on my surveys, the public and private sectors don't differ in any essential way. The differences are more likely to be specific to fields. There's more discrimination in fields dominated by men than those dominated by women, and there are regional differences. I mean, the phenomenon is not as obvious here in the city as it is somewhere a little more remote. This doesn't always hold true, but it runs roughly along these lines.

Interviewer: This takes us neatly to another essential perspective that can be seen in the reports on encountering gender diversity in the workplace that you mentioned and have completed for trans organisations. The most recent survey is from 2020, and a report on its results was published in late 2021. Would you tell us about the background to and need for this report, and the questions you were seeking to answer?

Anukatariina Saloheimo: Based on this most recent survey, you can say that the position of gender minorities varies a great deal. Many respondents said that things are really good, that their workplace strongly supports their identity. But things are far from great in other places, so it's very polarised. But the big wheel is very much turning towards something positive. It's becoming something normal. The issue doesn't always have to be highlighted, it's a normal part of our surroundings. Of course, that's the goal of equality work, that people don't make a fuss about it. And ... what more should I say. Oh yes, what I'm told is that those most discriminated against may not necessarily have the energy to advocate for their rights. They don't use the opportunities available to support them, they let it go. But it has such a strong effect on them that they may quit their jobs. They simply don't turn up, don't apply for a job. This cycle of exclusion is so strong that your mind can't take the continuous stress caused by discrimination.

One of my findings, which is not very prominent but it's still there, was that trans people include many people on the neurospectrum. And what makes the situation difficult is if a person is different on the outside and they also differ from others in terms of behaviour. So behaviour is the thing that's most likely to eventually, so to say, trigger the community to bully them and so on. But this is articulated in terms of being trans, which means the discrimination appears to be trans discrimination, and the person in question also perceives it as such. What's unfortunate is that there are separate forms of support available for people on the neurospectrum, but the support is not used in this situation, because the whole thing is misinterpreted. Even small things ... I was asking about, not just about discrimination according to the law, but about things such as feeling awkward, which were very common. And if we're talking about this in relation not to the law, but to inclusion, it's toxic. If small gestures and expressions continually remind you that you don't belong, inclusion is not realised. And there's a lot of this in the reports.

Interviewer: As a follow-up question, based on the survey findings, what would you like to say to current university students? What do you think is key from this perspective?

Anukatariina Saloheimo: Well, to university students who belong to the majority population, it's good to be aware of these things. It's good to recognise the background to discrimination. Just now I mentioned how the big picture has got better, but a strong counter-movement has also emerged. The issue has, as it were, been hyped too much or something, which gives rise to reactions. Some of the reactions are about religious

fundamentalism, where gender and sexual minorities offend their idea of the natural order of creation, so they oppose this issue. And then there are people who find gender terribly important in social situations. This is more common among those assumed to be men than those assumed to be women. They feel anxious if they can't gender people in a social situation. And depending on what they've learned, some of them may even become enraged.

Then there's a fairly closely related group of people who have sort of a relaxed way of making jokes, including jokes about gay and trans people. So they see others as spoilsports. These are the types of counter-movements there are. We're talking mainly about people assumed as men in a male-dominated community. But a new thing, though it's been seen before too, and we find it also in the academic community, is the connection between anti-trans ideas and feminism. This phenomenon is known as TERF, or trans-exclusive radical feminism. The idea has gained serious traction in England. There, some people even in high academic positions think that trans women threaten the rights of women, meaning women who agree with the midwife's assumption about their gender. This idea has also gained a foothold in Finnish academia.

Interviewer: This perhaps segues well to my next question. You carried out your previous survey in 2016. What do you think, has there been a change since then in how genders and sexualities are encountered, or in equality in the workplace? If so, what has changed and how?

Anukatariina Saloheimo: Yes, things have changed. Just in general since 2016, there's been a general trend towards the better. In this survey, I mean the people were obviously not the same, but the results indicate a difference in that the situation has improved particularly among employers and supervisors. I assume that's partly down to the 2015 amendment of the Act on Equality between Women and Men, which was actually the topic of the survey, the effects of the amendment or what was assumed to have taken place as a result of it. Then again, the surveys found no major change for the better among colleagues. But when people were asked whether they think the situation has improved in absolute terms, very few said that it had deteriorated. Most said that things are better or the same, so the world has really changed for the better in this respect.

Interviewer: Do people have any typical misconceptions or misunderstandings about gender and sexual diversity in the workplace?

Anukatariina Saloheimo: Sure. Of course, when people are not openly themselves, whether they are straight, gay, trans, non-binary or whatever, there is still what the community assumes about being a man, being a woman, who you are interested in, who your family is,

and these types of issues are difficult. And further, even if you are openly gay or lesbian, family relationships are often difficult to understand, that you can have a family of three or four people, with two fathers and two mothers, or one father and two mothers, or vice versa, as children's guardians. The group that people understand the least in this respect are non-binary people, who don't identify as men or women. How they are gendered in the work community. Often people make mistakes, and then there are people's conceptions of what a non-binary person is, someone who may turn up one day in the workplace dressed in a very feminine way with a skirt and a bow. They just happen to be what is called gender fluid, so one day they may be slightly more in one direction than on another day. So these people are under tremendous social pressure, on the one hand they are ignored, and on the other, when they announce that they belong to a gender minority, they may get nasty feedback of the type 'who do you think you are, being like that'.

Another thing you still see a lot today unfortunately is the idea that being transgender is a mental health disorder. I mean it's still included in the official Finnish classification of diseases, although it's not been treated that way for decades. On the contrary, the diagnosis is about excluding any mental health disorders. But somehow it's still at the back of people's minds, they wonder whether these people are somehow confused. The new classification of diseases will change this, so being transgender will no longer be a disease of any type. Only the conflicting feelings, either social or physical, will be diagnosed and treated.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to say to those students who are wondering about the effect of their gender or sexual identity on their career, or experiencing related discrimination at this very moment?

Anukatariina Saloheimo: I'd say in principle you can be confident the world has changed massively from before. The risk of discrimination is not huge, but it's not non-existent either. So in principle you may come across these situations. If you wish to consider this issue, if you have the resources, having your own way of making your identity known in the workplace, as something natural, 'this is what I came here as, and this is what I am', is surprisingly effective at reducing the space for discrimination. Because if you are being apologetic, people who have a tendency to discriminate against others will target you like a hyena catching their prey.

This doesn't mean that the responsibility for non-discrimination is with each individual. Not all people have the resources or simply the skills to do this, but when you have the option and the resources, you should put in the effort. This also means contacting the employer, or the supervisor, before revealing the matter if you haven't yet 'come out' in the workplace. When you're applying for a job, there are certain signals that tell you the workplace has at least tried to do what it should. Even during the recruitment process, the values of the workplace will show you that, if the values include non-discrimination, or inclusion. And in a recruitment situation, when things are going well, these issues will be highlighted, and you will be asked about or at least given the space to tell about these things. You may not be

asked directly, but given the opportunity to do so. These are good signs that the workplace may be one where the issue is not a problem. In terms of the materials available about the workplace, possibly online, they may include a policy for the measures taken to maintain non-discrimination or inclusion. If this type of policy has been established, it tells you that the workplace has at least thought about the issue. It doesn't mean that it has been implemented, but the chances are at least higher.

If there are problems, it's good to know there are several channels for obtaining support. The supervisor is responsible, but if they are not willing or able, they obviously have their own supervisor, all the way to the top of the chain of command. And if you can't get help through that channel, union representatives and occupational safety and health staff can address the issue. If you have a colleague, they can support you. So if the workplace culture is such that everyone knows what to do in these situations, and what not to do, a colleague saying 'hey, it's not OK for you to say that', means much more than if the whole thing is shrouded in mystery, and everyone's just gobsmacked about what the person meant. If you're really at loggerheads with someone, you also have the opportunity to take a matter involving a sexual minority to the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, and further to a committee. And if it's about a gender minority, the Ombudsman for Equality and a committee can address it. And sure, you can even take the matter to court, but in terms of an employment relationship, if you go that far, it may be very difficult to continue working there. A further tip I'd offer is mediation. If a mediation procedure is used in the workplace, then you'd be pretty well equipped, at least it would be a safe place.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add before we wrap up this interview?

Anukatariina Saloheimo: No, I don't think so.

Interviewer: Thank you very much, Anukatariina. It was a pleasure to have you on the podcast.

Anukatariina Saloheimo: Thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you for listening to Working Life for Everyone. This podcast was brought to you by University of Helsinki Career Services.