

Working Life for Everyone? Podcast: Ellinoora Vesala

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 the people who have dedicated their careers to doing something about that. My name is Heini Hult-Miekkavaara and I am one of the career counselors at the University of Helsinki career services.

Today, we are talking about careers in the age of ecological crisis. I am joined by Ellinoora Vesala who works as the Head of Domestic Operations in SASK, the Trade Union Solidarity Centre of Finland. It's the human rights organisation of Finnish trade unions, with focus on labour rights. And for those of you, listeners, who are not familiar with the trade union or labour union system here in Finland, basically they are a very fundamental part of the Finnish labour market, professional organisations which you can join based on your field of studies or work. And all of them also have student members. But anyway, a warm welcome, Ellinoora. We are very happy to have you here.

Ellinoora Vesala: Thank you very much.

Interviewer: Tell us, what exactly do you do? What is SASK and what do you personally do at SASK?

Ellinoora Vesala: SASK is a human rights organisation focusing on workers' rights in the Global South. Our objectives are based on the fundamental principles and rights at work that are defined by the International Labour Organisation, ILO. In addition to this, we also focus on achieving living wage for all workers in the world. The ILO fundamental principles are no child labour, no forced labour, no discrimination, right to organise and negotiate, and also right to occupational health and safety. So, these are the building blocks for everything that SASK does. How do we do this? We work with local trade unions in our operating countries, about 20 countries at the moment in Latin America, Africa and Asia. We run development cooperation projects in these countries together with the local trade unions, the research institutions that are linked to the labour markets and labour confederations in these countries. In Finland, we have 35 trade unions as our affiliates that are also involved in this development cooperation that we do to achieve our goals.

Interviewer: Okay, thank you. What would you say to our listeners, why is this international cooperation solidarity work so important?

Ellinoora Vesala: Well, workers' rights are human rights. The trade unions are human rights organisations because of this, and that is why it is important that we have this human rights approach to our work. The international solidarity can be described as many things. But I think the most important thing to understand is that solidarity goes both ways. It is about being equal, it is about learning from each other, supporting each other, having common goals that we work towards together. So, it is not something that is given from one party to another, but it goes both ways. So, it is really important to understand that it is not just that we would go somewhere, to Indonesia for example, and say that we have this really good social security system in Finland, and now it would be a good idea for Indonesia to implement the same system. That is not how it works. But we talk together, we see how we can support, in this case, the Indonesians to find a solution that best suits their own circumstances and their challenges, and what are the solutions in that environment. And that expertise comes from the locals in these countries, not from us.

Interviewer: Okay. And you mentioned, Indonesia is literally on the other side of the world. Why should we care? I mean they are so far from us. Why is it important for us, even here in Finland, to care about the working conditions of people on the other side of the globe?

Ellinoora Vesala: Well, there are quite a few reasons. First of all, the human rights are same for us all. If we do not care about how the human rights are guarded in other parts of the world, we might as well not guard for them here either, because bad practices do spread. So, that is why we need to pay attention on what is happening around the world, and it's easier to sort of try and influence those bad practices before they reach, you know, our shores here in Finland. And we are touched by these topics in our everyday lives. For example, through the everyday goods that we use and buy. Unfortunately, at the moment, the value chains of the companies are not that transparent that we would know automatically where a certain product is coming from or in what kind of conditions the people who have made our clothes have been working in. And that is why at the moment the responsibility is still sort of left on the shoulders of the consumers. And that is until the companies, through legislation, obligated to make these value chains more transparent and pay more attention on the corporate due diligence. So, it is in that way that in everyday life we are all touched by the conditions, what they are elsewhere in the world. Also, if you think from a company perspective, if the conditions or the legislation for companies would be more comprehensive and extensive, then also the competition would be more fair for those companies that are already taking due diligence more seriously. So, that also affects the Finnish companies.

Interviewer: And what do you say are the most important aspects or the crucial aspects that we should be aware of?

Ellinoora Vesala: I think what we should demand, mostly, is to make sure that the ILO fundamental principles are ratified in other countries as well. Most importantly, the right to organise. Maybe through one example: if we look at many of the headlines at the moment, the World Cup in Qatar, Qatar does not have the right to organise for the migrant workers, the trade unions are not allowed to operate in Qatar. So, any kind of developments or improvements for the conditions of the workers are really hard to make happen because of the lack of these rights, because of the lack of the presence of trade unions. For example, SASK is operating through Nepal and India, where these migrant workers are coming from, because we do not have access to Qatar. So, we are working with the migrant workers before they go to Qatar or other Gulf countries or/and when they come back from these countries. But in Qatar, we cannot operate because of this lack of these rights. So, in many other countries, we would already have the tools in place to start defending the rights of the workers or improving the working conditions, but in Qatar it has been a really long process to get even any kind of labour reforms in place, which has happened now in the last couple of years. But that road has been very long.

And the, the other thing that I maybe want to mention is the legislation for due diligence. This was supposed to be in the programme of the government that is in power at the moment in Finland. But last spring, it was announced that the legislation will not be processed during this government and it will be postponed, and most likely not in the programme for the next government. So, now the focus is on the EU-level legislation to see that we make sure that it covers the majority of the companies, so that it is not just about the biggest companies, but also the smaller companies have to follow the same regulations. So, that is very important.

Interviewer: So, here we see that the trade unions play a major part, and the right the organise for workers is a key element in changing the working conditions. But what would you say to people who argue that, "Isn't it good that do work, that they have work?" Many people tend to argue. Sometimes you hear cases where people argue that any type of work is good for people, it is a way to lift out of poverty. And even justifications for sweatshops, that they keep children off the streets and out of crime. But what would you personally say? Do you say this sort of thinking is actually upkeeping poverty and oppression? And maybe even... Can we talk about slave work? Is that what is happening, for example, in Qatar? Or is it even modern day colonisation?

Ellinoora Vesala: Well, first of all, in the case of Qatar, yes, we can talk about slavery-like conditions and we can talk about forced labour. Many of the elements of forced labour are sort of... You can tick the boxes in the case of Qatar. What you are saying about sweatshops and child labour, the way to keep the kids off the street is not to have them work, but to have them go to school. And the way to get the kids to school is to pay their parents a living wage, so that they can provide for their families and the kids will not have to worry about the income of the family, but they get to go to school and get an education. That is how you

can break the vicious cycle over generation poverty. So that the parents, first of all, understand the meaning, the importance of education and the importance of not looking at it in short term, that the kids are just bringing in additional income for the family, but in the long term, that they are going to have a better life through their education and then having a better job when they grow up. What you said first, isn't it best that you have any kind of a job... When you speak to the workers, for example, in Nepal or Bangladesh, or India, or Mozambique, they all want to work. It is not a case of... For example, if we decide to boycott something here in Finland, that might mean that the factory is closed down somewhere in Bangladesh. And that means that all of those workers will lose their jobs and they will lose the income that they are getting for their families. Workers, generally, just want to do their job in a safe environment, so that it is not a threat to their health and so that they get enough money to be able to provide for their families. So, I think it is important to understand, that any kind of work is not valuable. It has to be a decent work in decent conditions.

Interviewer: So, it is not just working in general and definitely not just about having a job and working, but to have a decent work or a job. How do you define decent work? And actually, does everyone in Finland have decent work?

Ellinoora Vesala: Probably not. Or definitely not. I mean we have had these cases in Finland recently where, for example, the berry-pickers and the restaurant workers, where people have been working in the forced-labour kind of conditions. Or even construction workers, there was a big case about the Olympics stadium being renovated, and how the workers, the migrant workers, who were working on that project, what their housing was like and how they were paid late and so on. So, a lot of similarities to the conditions of the migrant workers in other countries as well. Decent work could be described as a situation where I can do my job in an environment that is safe and healthy. I get to do the job, so that I am paid enough to provide for me and my family. I have enough rest and time for my family as well. So, the working hours are not too long. And I also have the ability to influence my own circumstances, so that I can, together with the employer, improve the conditions that need to be improved. So, I have that influence and that ability to take part. I think those are some of the important definitions of decent work.

Interviewer: And the lack of those would be a telltale sign for us to notice that something is wrong.

Ellinoora Vesala: Yes, definitely. And even in Finland we hear from Finnish union activists that, for example, employers are trying to cut down the hours that they are allowed to use for the shop steward work, for the union work. The union activists... The employers are restricting the amount of information they are giving to the shop stewards. There have been

some changes to our tripartite negotiation system in the past few years. All of this can be seen as a negative development. But we are still in a fairly good situation in Finland. I mean we have a quite extensive labour law, we have a reliable justice system, we have authorities that we can trust, and we have this long tradition of negotiating between the state, the employer, and the workers. So, that is a good situation to be in. But it does not mean that we do not have issues here. And, again, this is where... We discussed earlier about the solidarity. So, when there have been these situations in Finland... For example, in August, there was this patient safety legislation that was passed in the Parliament. The Finnish union movement was getting solidarity messages from other countries because part of that legislation had to do with limiting the right to strike for the health professionals. That was considered as a violation against the workers' rights. So, we were getting solidarity messages, it is not just that we are giving the solidarity messages to the workers in other countries. But this system that is in place in Finland, with the negotiating between the state, the employer, and the workers — that is a long tradition. But it is still a system that can sort of be taken down if we are not paying attention. And the same goes for all human rights. Once you reach a certain level, it does not mean that it cannot get worse. So, we need to be very careful that we defend these things continuously and we do not sort of close our eyes from any negative developments that might be taking place.

Interviewer: So, even though the situation here in Finland is quite good, since we have these social or societal structures and legislation to ensure that people's well-being is taken care of in working life, how could we... You also mentioned that we have to constantly be aware of this and take care of our system, and ensure that we manage to keep it up. How could we as individuals make sure that we are aware and have the skills and competences or understanding of the system, so that we can do this?

Ellinoora Vesala: I think one step is that we take the right to organise seriously. And we do organise. The organising rate in Finland has been going down in the past couple of decades. So, I think one thing that everyone can do is to look up what does it mean to be a member of a union and what kind of benefits that has. Not just for the individual, but for the workers as a larger group. It is very important that the organising rate stays at a certain level, so that the system does not fall down. So, that is one thing that everyone can do. And when it comes to, for example, cases like discrimination at the workplace or such situations, every one of us has a responsibility then to report those things and not just sort of turn our backs or think that it is none of my business. So, if we let these phenomena flourish, then they will get worse. So, all of us can sort of take a role in that.

Interviewer: That is good to hear. What about another larger issue that we cannot turn a blind eye to, that is climate change or the climate crisis? That is perhaps the most visible and tangible of the eco-crisis at the moment and it does affect the working and living conditions

of people all over the world, in different parts of the world. Who would you say is most at risk? And what actually are the risks?

Ellinoora Vesala: Well, generally, the effects of climate change and fighting climate change, the effects are very different, depending on where you live in the world, what sector you work in. And even within the sectors — depending on what kind of job you do. So, that varies a lot. Still, the ones that are most at risk are, again, the most vulnerable groups. So, those people working in the informal sector, women and children who do not have a steady income, who do not have access to social security. So, it is definitely hitting those vulnerable groups the worst. But it is really important to understand, in terms of the world of work, that the climate change is also creating jobs. Not all jobs are just going to disappear, even from the energy sector. There is still going to be new job creation. But what we do need is a lot of re-training. And I think the trade union movement has a big role to play in this, globally, that we make sure that people are getting re-trained for the new kinds of jobs that are created. Also, a big issue to figure out for all of us together is how this is going to be financed because it is going to cost money. So, what is the role of the state and what is the role of the employers, and what is the role of the workers themselves. Then we will find these very different kinds of solutions, depending on the environment where we are looking at. For example, SASK is working now in 20 different countries and in several different sectors. So, we sort of have a different approach to the climate change or the "just transition", as we call it in the trade union movement, depending on what country we are talking about, where we are operating. Because the solutions really are so different. Our main approach is that we try to, again, support the local unions, so that they can be involved in the discussions in the society at large. And for them to be able to do their advocacy work, so that the workers' rights are taken into consideration when these new structures and laws and so on are created because of climate change and because fighting climate change.

Interviewer: Do you see that people here, also in Finland, will be affected differently? Different groups of people?

Ellinoora Vesala: Absolutely. I think we are not really, in Finland, grasping yet how big of an effect it will have. Also, the Finnish trade unions will have to start working more and more on this. Maybe they already should have. [Laughing]

Interviewer: That is a little message out to all of the trade unions here in Finland. Thank you. But what would you say to students? What would you say to someone, for example, studying here at the University of Helsinki, who is pondering about their career and thinking about, "Is there a future for us in this age of eco-crisis?" Societies might be collapsing... Is there any hope?

Ellinoora Vesala: I do not think I would be that pessimistic, that societies would be collapsing. I think now there is a demand for different kinds of careers in sustainable development. Even more, I think sustainable development will be an element in every kind of job in the future. I think that is more the direction that we are taking. So, I do not think there is any organisation that can say, "We do not have to worry about this" about climate change, for example, or any job where you would not have to face any kind of effects of the changes that we are facing. I think, definitely, there is a demand for this.

Interviewer: There is demand, there are different alternatives. And action, being able to take action, that always gives hope. How do you yourself tackle this? Do you get anxious? You are at the core of this, you get to see very concretely how all of this is affecting people. So, how do you yourself find hope for meaningful aspects in your work?

Ellinoora Vesala: Well, you get to see the good things and the bad things. So, it is... For me, it is encouraging to see even just one individual's circumstances getting better. So, someone getting more control over their own lives and their livelihoods. Or someone getting more time with their families through some negotiations with the employer. So, it is not necessarily always very big leaps, it can be very small things. But those are sort of human accomplishments. For me, those are... For that individual, that can mean the world. So, I think you have to be able to look at also the small steps that are taken. But there are also really huge developments that are taking place. A couple of years ago, we managed to have the ILO right to organise ratified for the public sector workers in the Philippines. And this is millions of workers who are affected by this. And that is the first Asian country that is giving the right to organise to public sector workers. We worked for that for over 10 years, together with public sector unions in Finland, but also in other countries. So, that was a huge effort. And it took a really long time.

But then, in the end, the influence that you can have can be really huge. So, it does not necessarily happen so often, but then you have to focus on these developments. And it does happen: minimum wage legislation being created in different countries, social security system developed so that, for example, domestic workers can also benefit from the social security. Again, millions of people and their families are affected. And again, the women get more money for the job they do so they have their kids go to school. So, you know, it multiplies when you look at the chains of how that development goes.

Interviewer: Sounds amazing. I often, as a career counselor, encourage people to think about how their career decisions can create well-being and to think about how their work can make a difference. And even change the world, like you are doing. Your work definitely changes the world for the better. It has been really interesting to hear about your work and what SASK does, and why all of this is important even for all of us here in Finland, how

working conditions are arranged all over the world. What else would you like to say to our listeners?

Ellinoora Vesala: Well, maybe just to say that for me it has always been important to work for a cause. And sometimes someone might say that you are too idealistic or too naïve. But I always say that I am rather an idealist than a cynic. So, you know, I myself choose to believe that there is a lot of room for improvement and there are possibilities to play a role in that. So, if you have that chance, then you should take it.

Interviewer: Those are very wise words to finish. Thank you very much, Ellinoora Vesala. It has been such a pleasure hearing your thoughts and listening to you. Thank you very much!

Ellinoora Vesala: Thank you!

Interviewer: Thank you for listening to Working Life for Everyone. This broadcast was brought to you by the University of Helsinki career services.