

### **Working Life for Everyone podcast: Late Mäntylä**

**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 workplace and about related challenges. My guest is Late Mäntylä, a chaplain who is also active in the public debate. A warm welcome.

**Late Mäntylä:** Thank you!

**Interviewer:** You have long worked as chaplain for University of Helsinki students and the LGBTQIA community. In addition, you play a prominent role in public discussion on equality and run your own podcast called Laten Lataamo. How are you? What are you up to right now?

**Late Mäntylä:** Thank you. I suppose this is where I should say 'I'm good, thanks', perhaps because my podcast, although admittedly I haven't recorded any new episodes for a while, has as its slogan 'fewer taboos in the church'. So in the spirit of breaking taboos, I can tell you I am not, in fact, doing well, specifically in relation to today's theme. Let me put it this way: being a non-binary person myself – it's maybe a bigger thing than being gay – advocating for LGBTQIA people in the role of clergy eats away at you, in this church of ours. Lately, I've been struggling to cope. On the other hand, I'm excited about studying to become a job counsellor. I'm really fired up about it. It feels so me. I get to use the skills I have developed over the years.

**Interviewer:** That's great! Maybe now is a good time to delve into some of the questions weighing on your mind, also for the sake of the common good and to share your thoughts.

**Late Mäntylä:** Yes. I'm really happy to be here!

**Interviewer:** On a general level, what sort of things do people come to you to talk about?

**Late Mäntylä:** It's a wide range of things, but a lot relates to relationships: interaction and, on the other hand, loneliness, a lack of relationships, coping. Mental health issues, too, but of course, I refer people to others if necessary. But often people who are waiting for an appointment with a psychotherapist come to me to talk about their life. For me personally, sexual and gender issues are accentuated because I have a profile as someone who is involved with and is an expert in them. Many people want to consider those issues with me.

**Interviewer:** In other episodes focused on this theme, we discuss issues such as approaches to gender diversity in the Finnish workplace and the gender segregation of the job market. Staying at a general level, but in the spirit of breaking taboos and saying things out loud, as you said: when talking to students in your professional role, do you come across any questions or concerns about their future and career that are somehow connected to their gender or sexual identity? And if so, what are they like?

**Late Mäntylä:** Yes, these things do crop up. Even the very basic question, will I be accepted? Can I openly be what I am in the workplace? Or do I have to be in the closet? Can I demand that I am treated genuinely equally? Or do I have to accept some form of discrimination? Do I have to tolerate microaggressions? How can I cope with minority stress? Because when you're studying, it's easier to build your own group and select the people you're with. On average, at least among university students, people are more aware of these issues now. But when you enter employment, you'll come across people from different generations, depending on the workplace of course. The management is usually aged 50 or above in many places. They aren't necessarily conscious and willing to encounter diversity and treat people equally. These are the types of issues people reflect on.

**Interviewer:** If we still stay at a general level and look at the big picture, whether that be the workplace, university or society, do you think these issues are talked about openly, or are people left to mull over them on their own?

**Late Mäntylä:** I'd say social media has helped a lot. It has given the space and a voice to all sorts of people. Traditional media used to dominate the space. It had enormous power: whose voice is heard? Now different types of people get their voices heard through social media. So they talk about things there, although I often hear that people don't have the courage and capacity to talk about these issues. This may be due, for example, to bad experiences of professional helpers. They don't always understand issues of diversity and minority stress. You have to train the person who's supposed to be supporting you. These experiences are so heavy that many of us are bad at seeking help. The threshold is high anyway, and if you're afraid of being belittled and not understood, it can be quite a deflating experience, so you don't have the courage to tackle it. That's a big problem. People belonging to certain minorities are underrepresented, for instance, in mental health

services, because they're afraid of not being heard. Luckily, the media is increasingly addressing these issues, giving space to diversity. Books are published all the time. So I think we have taken steps in a good direction, but too many people are still left to deal with their concerns on their own.

**Interviewer:** Let's turn now to the job market. I'm sure the field you're most familiar with in the Finnish job market is, alongside universities, the church, both as an institution and as an employer. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is a public-sector organisation with 20,000 employees and about 3.7 million members. In recent years, we have seen and heard in the media a lot of multifaceted discussion on the relationship of the church and Christianity to LGBTQIA minorities, and vice versa. What's the situation like within the organisation, on the employer–employee axis? What are people talking or thinking about?

**Late Mäntylä:** First of all, discrimination within religious communities is permitted by law, but only in matters related to the practice of religion. When talking about the employer–employee axis, the same laws apply to the church and all other religious communities as to secular employers. The problem is that the culture of the church is there even though it's a workplace. You can see that in the media, the dominant thinking there. Human rights issues are turned into matters of opinion. If it's a matter of faith, it's considered justified. If you think, for example, that being gay is a sin, or you don't acknowledge gender diversity, as the Bible says something simplistic on it. These are really questions of interpretation.

At the workplace level, people rarely say it directly, but it becomes apparent in situations such as recruiting, when the officials elected by parishioners are making the decisions. Now the parish elections are coming up again. I hope people will vote for candidates who are against discrimination. This has even been researched: a certain percentage of the elected officials always includes those that don't even accept women as clergy. So ask yourself whether they accept sexual or gender diversity. If that's the starting point, you have quite a way to go. If people are openly themselves and belong to minorities. The culture is very much oriented towards harmony. Harmony is held in high regard. So it makes you think how much room there is to highlight grievances, which are inevitable when you belong to certain minorities whose status as equals is not yet recognised in our society. If a person who belongs to a sexual or gender minority doesn't accept a certain amount of discrimination, they are very easily labelled as scary, unreasonable and ill-behaved.

**Interviewer:** Do you see differences or similarities in this respect to the discussion on workplace equality in Finland or related challenges more broadly?

**Late Mäntylä:** Maybe in the sense that at least elsewhere it's not treated as openly as a matter of faith. Sure, you get this talk in parliament, too, but this aspect is missing generally

in workplaces. Then again, I think the church has discussed at least homosexuality openly for a long time. It's been on the agenda. In many places, people act as if there's no problem, but there's no progress if issues aren't discussed. I think that across the board, whether talking about the church or almost any workplace, gender diversity is an issue where our society still has a long way to go for people to feel genuinely equal.

**Interviewer:** Let's take a brief detour to address the connection between spirituality and career planning. I'm warning you, I will venture briefly into the hazardous terrain of feelings and experiential assumptions. In my own work as a career counsellor, I've noticed that in our fairly secular society, it is challenging to make your faith or religion, such as your Christian worldview or values, visible in the workplace or in job hunting. Perhaps people feel that they must somehow hide this side of themselves even if it is a central part of who they are and of their plans for the future. My limited experience of this phenomenon comes from the sphere of Christianity, so I don't wish to generalise or assume any more than I already have. What do you think of this claim or observation? Is there any truth to it?

**Late Mäntylä:** Yes, I think there is. I think it goes back to the fact that it wasn't so long ago that almost everyone in Finland was Lutheran Christian, at least on paper. I've been pleased to follow the increasing multiculturalisation of our society and how the spectrum of beliefs has grown. How the younger generation discusses these issues more naturally. They are not taboos, because you have someone in your class who celebrates Ramadan and so on. The practice of religion or spirituality, if it has existed, is much more public. I often hear people say that they're afraid to talk for fear of being labelled. There are strong assumptions about Christians, Muslims and so on, being a certain type. You are not even given the chance to explain. As a member of the clergy, I too carry the burden of people automatically assuming that I'm like Päivi Räsänen, which is quite heavy when you're actually one of those deeply hurt by Päivi Räsänen's words.

When it comes to questions of religion, even among people who are very aware on many levels, the thinking is often very simplistic, which is also caused by many people having been so hurt. They have traumas in that area. This is what causes it, for instance, in relation to today's theme. When you look at things from an intersectional perspective, which you always should do, people are not just about a single minority position. If you are, for example, Muslim and belong to a sexual or gender minority, or you're Christian, you have a religious belief, especially if it's one of these monotheistic religions, you're often in a very difficult position. Many people say they don't really feel safe even in their religious community because there they are discriminated against for being LGBTQIA. And they can't really be themselves in the LGBTQIA community either because they are 'dissed' for their faith, it's talked about with disdain. This is so important to keep in mind.

It's a big issue for me at the moment: It always is, for different people... We are all whole, complete beings: what is your life story, your whole background, all the positions you are in, and your experiences? For instance, for me at the moment, I've agreed to work mainly on social media until the end of the year because it's difficult for me to be at the University of Helsinki. Not because anyone has ever said anything bad about my sexuality or gender. As a non-binary person, I am nowhere as safe as I am at the University of Helsinki. This is a wonderful community. But because I'm a chaplain, it makes people react. I understand that well, but many people react like, "Whaat? We have a chaplain here! What's going on?" I understand it on a rational level, but it hits the same wound I suffer from in church. I'm ignored and my expertise is overlooked because I'm non-binary. It's tough. We always have to take these things into account. It's different for all of us. That's why people should have places where they can talk and discuss their issues.

**Interviewer:** Let's look at this from a broader temporal perspective. In 2009 you were Finland's first Evangelical Lutheran pastor to state publicly that they belong to a sexual minority. What's your view: over this period, has there been a change in how genders and sexualities are encountered or equality treated in the workplace and more broadly in society? If so, what has changed and how?

**Late Mäntylä:** Now, being gay is no big deal. When I came out in 2009, the time was right, even in the church, for a pastor to be gay. Actually, there was a demand for it, more broadly in our society, too. It went really well. But in 2015 or thereabouts, when I understood I'm non-binary and began to talk about that more, then ... it's tough. Both in the church and in our society. I've said before that it's probably because at the end of the day people find it a lot easier to accept and bear the fact that Seppo and Esko love each other. It's not threatening, them being there. It's their thing.

But when we talk about gender diversity, it's a challenge for all of us. Now I should start looking at people without assigning them a gender from the outside. I don't look at people, going 'that's a man' and 'that's a woman'. It requires a lot more. It triggers, or should trigger, processes many people are not ready for and that our society does not support. People are left confused. They may feel ashamed and guilty. They have to navigate difficult interactions.

I also think: if I look at the job market and how it has changed, I still can't come up with many leaders in our society who belong to a minority. It says a lot about discriminatory structures. It's no coincidence. It's not that those of us who belong to minorities are simply not good enough. On the contrary, we would usually be a lot better because we have an understanding and a vision for leading people that those who've always had a smooth ride don't have. It tells you about the structures.

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

**Late Mäntylä:** Of course. Again, it's such a broad spectrum. But just the fact that many people can't tell the difference between the two, and that's quite tough. I often find myself in situations where I say that people don't really understand gender diversity. This just happened the other week. The person I was talking to said, "Oh, what's so difficult about it?" And I'm trying to say ... and they go: "I have no problem with it. I don't care who are in a relationship with each other." And I'm like, yes, precisely. It's tough because you don't want to embarrass the other person by saying that they are actually talking about something completely different. People try to use a nicer term by referring to 'gender orientation' when they are actually talking about sexual orientation. They don't get it.

Of course, at its worst, some people really still think that a gay person is a paedophile or a perv who hurts children and converts them. You get a lot of talk in the field of gender diversity about children being forced into something. "You are no longer allowed to be a boy or a girl." It's totally absurd, but some people actually have to live with these conceptions. In more civilised circles, these things are often not said out loud, but it's almost worse because then you can't address it. You sense that there's something there, but you have nothing tangible to go on. And then you have those awkward situations where people start to prove to you how accepting they are. "Yeah, I have a gay friend." And I'm like, "Okay, how interesting". Or, "My cousin's child is trans." Often they use the wrong terms. It's so awkward.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything 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?

**Late Mäntylä:** First of all, I'd like to say that it's a superpower. Be proud of your diversity! Many Indigenous peoples have held those with a more diverse sexuality or gender in especially high regard. We have lost some of it, this wisdom of seeing more. You can actually see more. At the same time, I'd like to say that you should try to establish your own support networks. Because it can also be quite tough sometimes. And another thing: talk about your concerns. You can contact me. I really encourage you to do it. You can find me at Instagram [at]latemäntylä, [at]latemantyla, or whatever. We still have a way to go, but we're moving in a better direction.

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

**Late Mäntylä:** Maybe one thing I might add and highlight as a special issue here when talking about gender and sexual minorities and the workplace, as an occupational health issue. Because I ran into something unpleasant myself. I was supposed to receive 10 sessions of short-term psychotherapy at Terveystalo via occupational health. The coordinating psychotherapist called me asking what I was looking for. I told them I need someone who understands gender diversity, minority stress and so on. A month later I receive a reply saying, "We don't have this kind of therapist". I'm like "In the whole of Finland? I can do it remotely too." "No, sorry, there's no one." And I go, "OK, do you have anyone who experiences racism?" "No, afraid not." So I'm left on my own. This really needs to be sorted. Those with the power should get this sorted immediately so that we have professionals trained to address these issues. Minority stress is actually quite basic in this day and age, because it's the same for all minorities. All people should have the chance to feel better.

**Interviewer:** That's a very important point. I hope your message will get out to as many people as possible.

**Late Mäntylä:** Yes.

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

**Late Mäntylä:** Thanks for having me.

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