

## **Balancing work and family life – the liberal approach**

The increasing labour market participation of women, changing family forms and the demographic pressure from an ageing population have made the reconciliation of work and family one of the major topics on the European agenda.

During a seminar on 5 May in Stockholm, members of the European Liberal Women Network and ELDR Council delegates discussed the liberal approach to balancing work and family life. The outcome of the discussion shows that the full participation of women in economic life is linked to wide access to childcare and to a change of attitudes on gender roles. Panelists stressed that fathers should take greater family responsibilities to improve balance between work and family life.

**MEP and ELDR Vice-President Sharon Bowles** explained that the EU economy needs the full participation of women and that women want to be able to combine their family role with work. But she admits that this is tricky as childcare can be very expensive and some employers are reluctant to reduce working hours. Her solution was to set up her own company, in which she allowed part time working. “Access to childcare is key to solving the problem. Too much of the childcare is concentrated on pre-school but school holidays can also cause trouble for the working parents. Nothing that modern technologies can help reconcile work and family,” she said. Her conclusion is that “what we need above all are flexible minds among the employers and employees”.

**Annika Qarlssohn, MP, Swedish Center Party spokesperson for gender equality**, drew a picture of the challenges faced by Sweden to attain true gender equality. “While women represent 50% of the workforce, the labour market is segregated as many women work in the civil service and lower paid jobs. Moreover, women represent a bigger share of part time employment and retire earlier,” she said.

**Roger Mörtik, Public Policy Director at the Swedish confederation for professional employees (TCO)** stated that the countries with greater gender equality are also the countries with greater fertility rates and that the countries with a positive demography are in a better position for economic growth.

In October 2005, TCO made a survey of 1,000 people from five different EU countries: Sweden, Germany, UK, Italy and Poland thought equality moving backwards or forwards. The research shows that:

- In all countries, an overwhelming majority of the participants thought that the state should be responsible for public childcare so that the mothers and fathers could have the same possibilities to work. In Italy, the country that had the most votes, 85 per cent agreed with this.
- The research showed that both men and women in Europe are aware of the fact that men must take more responsibility for the children. In all countries, over 70 per cent thought that the fathers should spend more time with their children so that the mothers could have

the same possibilities to work.

- In all the countries, except the UK, a greater portion of the women than men thought that fathers should spend more time with their children.
- The European research showed that the younger age groups have the same unequal attitudes as the older ones. In Poland, Italy and Germany, in the age group 15 to 24, fewer thought that fathers should take greater responsibility for children compared to those in the age group 55 to 64.
- The majority did not think that women with pre-school children should work to the same extent, as fathers. The resistance was especially great in the UK at 70 per cent and in Poland at 63 per cent. In Italy and Sweden and even in Germany, sympathies for and antipathies against mothers with pre-school children working to the same extent as the fathers are more evenly divided.

For the full study, [click here](#)

**Rickard Eriksson from the Swedish Institute for Social Research and Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies** focused on the parental leave and on the introduction of “daddy months” in Sweden. Based on a proposal from Swedish liberals, the government introduced a reform to incentivize men to take more parental leave in 1995. The “daddy month” reform consists in reserving two months of the total parental leave available per child for the father. Analysing the effects of these reforms, he advises political decision-makers to:

- reserve months for the father if the reform coincides with an overall extension of parental leave.
- ensure that the father's parental leave is taken during the first two years after the birth of the child.

For a full analysis, click here: <ftp://ftp.iza.org/dps/dp1617.pdf>

**MP Tina Acketoft, Spokesperson for gender Equality from Folkpartiet**, explained that there is a clear link between gender equality and economic growth. She stressed that to create a gender equal society, men must participate in the first years of the children. “Women have changed their behaviour, now men have to change. It is not a revolution, it’s an evolution”, she said.

**Danish MP Ellen Trane-Norby (Venstre)** explained that a one year parental leave for women can have damaging consequences for a career but that working mothers face the risk to be singled out if they do not take it.

**UK Liberal Democrat David Griffith** explained that gender equality in a company’s management is key and that late mothers have a better negotiating position as employers do not want to lose valuable skills. He emphasized that time away from work should be as short as possible and that child care must be made widely available.

