

THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE



TCO AND THE WORK–LIFE BALANCE

TCO pursues issues to do with work–life balance because we want to see that a working life can be combined with family life, without either of these needing to remain in the shadow of the other. We believe in a combination of work and leisure time, a puzzle where all the pieces have a rightful place. There should be time for everything: work, children, one’s partner, home, leisure activities and Grandma!

All of us sit with our diaries on Sundays juggling the different pieces of our lives. It’s our attempt at achieving a balance between work and life, and the pieces don’t always fit together. But getting all the pieces to fit together is often difficult even for those who don’t have children. The possibility of more working more flexibly has obvious advantages, but there is also a downside. The border between work and free time can become blurred and there is a risk of ending up in a situation where demands from many different directions feel increasingly overwhelming.

It is just as wrong for the parents of small children to be excluded from sharing in the most stimulating tasks carrying the greatest responsibility in the workplace, as it is when those colleagues who do not have children are automatically expected to be willing to work weekends and during holiday periods. It must be possible to combine working life with a rich leisure time whether or not this time involves family life with one’s own children, or spending time with one’s friends, brothers and sisters or parents.

WHEN TCO PUT WORK–LIFE BALANCE ON THE POLITICAL AGENDA

For the last 10 years, TCO has pursued the issue of work–life balance in a variety of ways. Prior to the election campaign in 2002, TCO launched its Jobb ♥ Familj (Work ♥ Family) campaign, where we focused on the work–life balance. The campaign generated results: several of the Swedish Parliament parties pursued issues relating to families with children during their election campaigns. Both the Folkpartiet (Liberal Party) and the Centerpartiet (Centre Party) took up TCO’s proposal for an equality bonus in parental leave insurance to encourage parents to share their parental leave entitlements as equally as possible. In addition, an entirely

new political position was created: the job of Minister for the Family and Children, a cabinet minister post in the previous government's Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

The issue of work–life balance had become an item high up on the political agenda. And TCO continues to work hard for this item to remain high on the political agenda. And we will continue to do this until such time as similar conditions for men and women have been established in working life as well as in the home and in the community at large.

A WORK–LIFE BALANCE THAT WORKS WITH GENDER EQUALITY

A working life where there is gender equality is a fundamental demand of the union movement. But how far have we actually come? How does it come to be that it is still almost always women who take out the greater proportion of parental leave entitlement days and adapt their working life around the needs of the family? Why do many women experience that they do not get the same opportunities for development at work as men do? How does it come to be that the sickness rate is significantly higher among women than among men? How does it come to be that women on average earn one fifth less than men?

On the surface in Sweden today, it looks like men and women have equal opportunity to be gainfully employed and develop their careers throughout their entire working lives. But in practice, we still enter the workforce and working life on a different basis depending on our gender. Both the parties to the labour market and society in general must work against differences in salaries that do not have a basis in actual differences in competencies. The strong divide between male and female professions that exists today must cease. All issues to do with the labour market and working life must be analysed from the perspective of a gender equality.

Gender equality not only leads to a better work–life balance but also to higher economic growth rates. Sweden is named regularly as one of the countries in the world with the highest levels of gender equality in various studies. In comparison with many other countries, Sweden can

boast a reasonably high birth rate and a high rate of gainful employment among both mothers and fathers. A well developed parental leave insurance scheme is an important explanation for this. We should be managing it, utilising it equally and even improving it.

MORE PARENTAL LEAVE TAKEN BY FATHERS PROMOTES GENDER EQUALITY

Despite the fact that the current trend points towards more men taking out more parental leave entitlement days, the distribution between women and men is still very uneven. Studies show that a more even distribution of parental leave is an important investment for gender equality and development in this direction is going very slowly. In Sweden, fathers have had the opportunity to take parental leave for just over 30 years. But women still take out four times as many parental leave entitlement days as men do. This is a distribution that is far too lopsided, and policy has a big responsibility here.

The need for political reform is great. But the debate in the political arena appears to have come to a dead end. Clear proposals are needed on how it can be made easier to combine family and a career.

TCO'S DADDY INDEX

This is now the 10th year that TCO has presented its Daddy Index. The Daddy Index is a total appraisal of the proportion of all parental leave days taken out by fathers and the percentage of men among those on parental leave. If the child's father and mother share their parental leave entitlement equally, the index value is 100. Each year, TCO presents the figures for all municipalities. One of the purposes of measuring the Daddy Index is to inspire the local media to write about local differences. This has turned out to be a very effective way of shedding light on the issue. And in this way hopefully to induce more people to think about their sharing of parental leave entitlement.



Photo: Andy Prhat

TCO'S EQUALITY BONUS FOR PARENTAL LEAVE INSURANCE

The most common argument for fathers not taking out as much parental leave is the family economy. This is because men often earn more, and the reduction in his income is more marked for the family economy. In recent years, TCO has pursued the issue of an equality bonus in parental leave insurance in order to achieve a more even distribution of parental leave entitlement between men and women. In brief, TCO's proposal is that the parent allowance paid is raised from 80% to 90% for the days that are not transferred to the other parent. In this way, it would become economically advantageous to share parental leave entitlement equally. We believe that women as a group would get better conditions in the labour market.

An equality bonus would also facilitate discussions with the employer, not least for men in male-dominated industries where fathers taking parental leave is still looked upon with some suspicion. There would quite simply be sound economic arguments for mothers and fathers to share parental leave equally.

That the Swedish government has introduced an equality bonus in parental leave insurance is good – but its design, with tax relief for the parent with the lowest income, is too complicated. TCO's model is simpler and would generate the desired effect much more rapidly.

DUSTY OLD SWEDEN?

What then can the union do to prevent a repetition of the bad old days of women largely being relegated to the role of housewife? TCO is working to get decision-makers and employees to take a stand for the rights of parents in working life. Besides political decisions, encouragement and support in the workplace are important in this context. There are also men who are of the opinion that companies should demonstrate their express support and encourage men to take on the role and responsibility of caring for their children.

This also requires that the employer changes his attitude. Employees must have more influence over their daily work schedules and over their working hours. A previous TCO study showed that by far the most popular method of achieving a work–life balance among both men and women was to reduce their working hours.

TCO would like to see a more equal parenthood, not just because we believe that it is the foundation for a more equal working life. We also want children to have access to two parents and we want to move away from the old view of the man as the family breadwinner and the woman as the hub of the home. Just like women, men should have time for their families and for their children. We do not think that closeness to one's child should remain a female privilege.

Those countries that are dominated by old-fashioned ideas that men should provide for the family and women should take care of the children and family risk becoming stuck in a population trap with low birth rates and low growth. Women have taken on working life on a broad front during the last century. But men have not taken on the home and care of the children to the same extent. We still have good opportunities for long-term economic growth, but if Sweden's birth rate is to keep pace or improve, a policy that ensures that both men and women can combine work and family is needed.

FACTS ABOUT PARENTAL LEAVE

When a child is born, a parent's allowance is paid out to the child's parents for a total of 480 days. For 390 of these days, the parent's allowance can be paid at the same level as the parent's sickness benefit.

The allowance paid during these days is the equivalent of 80% of the parent's income on which their sickness benefit is based (in Sweden, this is called the SGI) divided by 365, but not less than SEK 150 per day. To be eligible for the parent's allowance, the parent must have been registered with the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Försäkringskassan) for at least 180 consecutive days prior to the first day on which the parent intends to claim the parent's allowance. Parents have the right to half of these days each. You can transfer parental leave entitlement days to the other parent.

However two months of these days are not transferable between the parents. These are what are referred to as the 'father months' and 'mother months'. On the birth of the child, both parents have the option to be on parental leave at the same time for 10 days. The purpose of this is for the mother to have support during the first weeks and that the father should be given the opportunity to establish early contact with his child.

Text: Ann-Marie Prhat, TCO

For more information and contact please visit www.tco.se

