To be or not to be a woman? – Highly educated women's perceptions of gender equality in the workplace

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The starting point of the paper is that highly educated women suffer less inequality in the workplace. To test it, both secondary and primary researches were conducted. Secondary data refer to the field of education, participation in knowledge-intensive activities, hierarchical status, and pay gap of highly educated women compared to men in selected European countries, while primary data reveal perceptions of highly educated women on women's contextual career factors and personal critical incidents' experiences concerning equality. The primary research was conducted on a sample of 675 highly educated women in Croatia. Results are tested for statistical differences according to respondents' demographics and compared with highly educated men's perceptions (n = 177).

The secondary data reveal that gender segregation is less present among highly educated women. In general, the primary data imply that highly educated women do not perceive contextual factors to negatively influence their careers, even though they had some negative gender-related experiences. Paper concludes with equality initiatives recommendations based on research results, and interviews conducted with HRM and general directors from MNCs with best equality practices.

Key words: gender segregation, gender equality, highly educated women, perceptions, EU, Croatia.

INTRODUCTION

Despite societal, governmental and organizational efforts to promote gender equality in society and workplace, women in both developed and developing countries continue

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to experience inequality in terms of education, employment status, industry of work, hierarchical positions, compensations, career advancement, etc. (e.g. Burke and Singh, 2014; Hernaus, Pološki Vokić and Aleksić, 2014; Schweitzer et al., 2011; WEF, 2013). Multiple reasons for gender gaps come from the gender essentialism hypothesis – the notion that men and women are innately and fundamentally different in interests and skills (England, 2010). Gender essentialism not only encourages stereotypes about women's status and role in the society and labour force, especially in some cultural clusters (e.g. Elamin and Omair, 2010), but it also encourages traditional choices of women (England, 2010). Even in more gender egalitarian national cultures, women and men continually occupy highly differentiated gender roles (e.g. male breadwinner and female homemaker), resulting in the greater likelihood of women taking the primary responsibility for home and family in addition to paid work/career (Seierstad and Kirton, 2015).

However, the latest studies imply that in the knowledge economy gender egalitarianism is gaining a momentum over gender stereotyping (e.g. McDaniel, 2008; Muusida and Picchio, 2014; Walby, 2011), leading to a greater gender equality than ever before. Women are more represented in the workforce, they caught up with men in the rates of higher-education graduation, they increased their training and representation in formerly male-dominated professional fields (such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics – STEM), and they entered many previously male-dominated occupations (such as management, law and politics) (e.g. Costa et al., 2014; England, 2010; Schweitzer et al., 2011).

Since the 1950s, gender equality has been widely accepted as a socially and economically important goal (Muusida and Picchio, 2014). Apart from affirmative actions which aim at ending women discrimination through the legal apparatus, an economic standpoint motivates organizations to pursue a greater gender diversity, as the female labour force constitutes an important reservoir of ability that companies must employ to cope effectively with changes in business environment (e.g. Bender and Scotto, 2014; Boeker et al., 1985).

The abovementioned is especially true for highly educated women, because they represent a pool of professional and executive talents. However, highly educated women, as a specific workforce group contributing to the substantial fall of differentials between women and men worldwide because of their better education and training (Weichselbaumer & Winter-Ebmer, 2005), are rarely explored in the gender segregation context. Therefore, the aim of our study was to assess the industry participation, hierarchical status, and pay gap of highly educated women compared to men, as well as highly educated women's perceptions on contextual career factors and personal critical incidents experiences concerning equality.

In the following sections, apart from the theoretical background, results of both secondary data analysis and primary research are presented – secondary data refer to official statistics, while primary data deal with the perceived gender equality. The theoretical background discusses main gender segregation areas analysed afterwards through the secondary research, as well as the rationales for primary research hypotheses development. Next, the secondary data referring to highly educated women equality in the labour force in the European Union (EU) are presented, followed by the description of methodology and results of the primary research conducted in Croatia, aimed to assess highly educated women's

perceptions on contextual and experienced career development obstacles. The paper concludes with equality initiatives recommendations based on theoretical and empirical research results, as well as on the interviews conducted with HRM and general directors from multinational corporation (MNCs) with best equality practices in Croatia.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Secondary research background – Gender segregation areas

Based on the literature review, five main areas of gender segregation could be detected: (1) educational segregation, (2) horizontal occupational segregation, (3) vertical/hierarchical occupational segregation, (4) pay segregation, and (5) segregation in values and preferences.

Educational segregation, covering both formal education and development opportunities within organizations, is nowadays less present than a couple of decades ago (e.g. Eurostat, 2011), when women were not encouraged to enrol in higher education as their role in society and family was not the one of a breadwinner. However, even though higher education has the potential to raise the expectations of women, many studies demonstrate that having higher levels of education does not lead to equality between men and women (e.g. Costa, 2014). For example, García-Mainar, García-Martín and Montuenga (2015: 809) conclude that a higher education level is not associated with lower segregation, since segregation among the medium-educated (upper secondary) is lower than among the highly-educated (university and similar), and that despite the fact that women are exhibiting higher average education levels than men, the latter are less segregated. Furthermore, women continue to pursue a "female" education profile, which locks them later into "female" segments of the labour market (Zimny, 2002). They still choose and are directed toward the more female-typical fields of study, such as arts, humanities and social sciences (e.g. England, 2010; Schweitzer et al., 2011), and are not encouraged to pursue education and careers in business or STEM (e.g. Walby, 2011; Williams, 2015). A consequence of using gender stereotyping when deciding on further education is also still present in organizations, as women continue to receive fewer development opportunities than men – for instance, they are considered less available and less committed to their work due to family obligations which makes them less attractive for training and development investments (e.g. Vallone Mitchell, 2000).

Horizontal occupational segregation, indicating that men's and women's work in occupations heavily populated by same-gender employees is frequently documented (e.g. Stier and Yaish, 2014). Women are still channelled into professions stereotypically associated with women – childcare, teaching, nursing, clerical work, service and sales work, as well as staff functions such as human resources or accounting (e.g. Charles, 2003; Gupta et al., 2009). Compared to female-dominated professions, male professions are traditionally manufacturing, craft, management, engineering, as well as line functions (e.g. Browne, 2006; England, 2010). Moreover, burdened by both economic and family responsibilities, many contemporary women choose 'women-friendly' jobs that do not offer high economic rewards, opportunities for upward mobility or status, but suit women's preferences to accommodate their dual roles through safer work, conventional working hours, flexible working arrangements, and lower penalties associated with

work separation (e.g. Gupta et al., 2009; Stier and Yaish, 2014). Such choices also lead to the incidence of over-qualification and over-skilling of women (Ziemann, 2015).

Vertical/hierarchical segregation, that implies that managerial positions are reserved for men, is firmly established not only in masculine but as well in feminine societies around the world. There is a lower share of women in managerial and executive jobs globally, and the higher the organizational level, the more glaring the gender gap (e.g. Dolado, Felgueroso and Jimeno, 2003). Even in industrialized countries, the number of women attaining higher positions remains low (Gripenberg et al., 2013).

Although the male-female wage gap has decreased in the past generation, the **pay segregation** is still present worldwide (e.g. Stier and Yaish, 2014; Weichselbaumer and Winter-Ebmer, 2005). The wage gap is documented to be higher for low-educated women and within low-prestige occupations (blue-collar jobs), while lower for high-prestige jobs (e.g. college graduates and academic jobs) (e.g. Mussida and Picchio, 2014; Weichselbaumer and Winter-Ebmer, 2005). Additionally, women still earn less than men because they are more likely to be employed in lower paying industries and in jobs with less career potential (Schweitzer et al., 2011), but also because of the stereotype in terms of their minor value for organizations compared to men (e.g. direct discrimination). In other words, the gender pay gap is often moving in the opposite direction from the gender employment gap, as women are entering relatively low-paid occupations and sectors.

Segregation in values and preferences of men and women is considered to originate in their biological and psychological characteristics (e.g. Helgesen, 1995, Moir and Jessel, 1995), but it as well to be rooted in surrounding cultural norms and beliefs – the degree of national gender equality (e.g. Hofstede, 1991; Lyness & Kropf, 2005). Namely, according to the cultural conditioning theory, only a small part of gender role differentiation is biologically determined – the stability of gender role patterns is almost entirely a matter of socialization, as girls and boys learn their place in society (e.g. Hofstede, 1991). In some cultures, gender roles are similar or overlap, while in other cultures they are clearly distinct (e.g. Elamin & Omair, 2010; Hofstede, 1991; Seierstad & Kirton, 2015). In the latter, gender stereotypes might derive from traditional sex roles within a specific culture, that is, they might reflect cognitive beliefs about the differences between masculinity and femininity that the members of a particular culture share (Best, 2004 as cited in Elamin & Omar, 2010). For example, researchers revealed that women rate family priority significantly higher than career priority, i.e. they give priority to home roles of partner and parent (Burke and Singh, 2014). Human capital theorists suggest that, because of the aforementioned, women frequently choose to trade off income and advancement for other job attributes, such as having shorter or more flexible working hours, and they tend to have lower salary and career expectations than men (e.g. Gasser, Flint and Tan, 2000; Schweitzer et al., 2011; Tolbert and Moen, 1998). It is also argued that women, as they are more interpersonally-oriented than men, have more relational priorities – women value job attributes that allow social contacts, friendly work environments, good interpersonal relationships, greater opportunities for social rewards, and socially worthwhile professions, while men give priority to variables that meet individual needs, are more responsive to monetary and career-related rewards, and search

for power and leadership (e.g. Blackburn et al., 2002; Carlson and Mellor, 2004; Freeman, 2003; Lambert, 1991; Rowe and Snizek, 1995).

Primary research background – Hypotheses development

There are many contextual factors that obstruct women in advancing their careers. Obstacles to women's career development could be assigned to three main groups – social, organizational and personal obstacles, as exhibited in Table 1. The three groups are highly interrelated, as social context influences organizational practices, as well as personal judgment.

Table 1
Main obstacles to women's career development

Social obstacles	Organizational obstacles	Personal obstacles
- Traditional viewing of women's roles in society (predetermined to be good housewives, wives and mothers) - Stereotyping about women's emotional over-sensitivity - Valuing women's appearance over their knowledge, skills or abilities - Lack of gender quotas (in politics, corporate boards, management, etc.) - Lack of female role models in society - Men's beliefs that women are not as capable as men in performing the most demanding jobs (e.g. managers, politicians, physicians) - Women's beliefs that they are not as capable as men in performing the most demanding jobs	- Lack of organizational policies and programs that enable work-life balance (e.g. flexible working arrangements, child care) - Aversion to employ, train and develop, or promote women to higher levels (especially mothers with little children as they are considered to be less available and less committed) - "Glass ceiling" (the invisible barrier that prevents women to take top management positions) - Insensibility of organizations toward mothers (e.g. overtime and travel demands, business meetings after the regular working time) - Lack of gender diversity awareness trainings for both men and women - Lack of women mentoring programs	- Work-life balance priority - Choosing women-friendly jobs (jobs without overtime, travelling, etc.) - Personal decision of not accepting higher managerial positions - Stereotyping the role of women in the own family - Lack of networking time

Based on: Heim & Golant (1993); Helgessen (1995); Položki (2001); Stier & Yaish (2014); Vallone Mitchell (2000).

In order to assess highly educated women's perceptions on contextual career factors and experiences of personal critical incidents concerning equality in the workplace, we developed four hypotheses implying that gender gap is not as wide for highly educated women. We routed our hypotheses in general beliefs that a more educated working population helps to reduce gender-inequality in the distribution of workers across occupations (García-Mainar, García-Martín and Montuenga, 2015), and that women with academic education improved their market position vis-à-vis men (Stier and Herzberg-Druker, 2017).

Our first hypothesis relates to factors which highly educated women in Croatia perceive as obstacles for their careers: H_1 = *Highly educated women in Croatia do not perceive contextual factors to affect their career development significantly*; while our second hypothesis deals with respondents' experiences of unequal treatment because of their gender: H_2 = *Highly educated women in Croatia do not experience widespread gender inequality*. Both our hypotheses assume no gender discrimination of this specific group of employees, as highly qualified and skilled employees, no matter of their gender, are the most valued and desired human capital. This should imply that highly educated women are being treated equally.

Except for contextual obstacles to women's career development, it is increasingly debated that the gender segregation in the labour market is partially the result of choices made by women (Stier and Yaish, 2014). The phenomenon of "leaky pipeline" suggests that women enter the pipeline, but subsequently decide to leave the career field due to personal priorities (Schweitzer et al., 2011). As highly educated women are welcomed in the workforce, our assumption is that it is primarily their choice to leave the pipeline: H_3 = *Career tracks of highly educated women in Croatia are primarily a matter of personal choice*.

Finally, taking into account Khoreva's (2011) standpoint that individuals with a higher education level are more likely to have learnt about gender inequalities, and Sandberg's (2013 as cited in Burke and Singh, 2014) finding that having a supportive husband or partner is important for women's career success and advancement, our final hypothesis deals with highly educated men's perceptions of their colleagues equal career opportunities. Because of their background, we expect them to be egalitarian oriented: H_4 = *Highly educated men's perceptions about Croatian women obstacles to career development do not differ significantly from highly educated women's perceptions*.

HIGHLY EDUCATED WOMEN EQUALITY IN SELECTED EUROPEAN COUNTRIES AND CROATIA – SECONDARY DATA

The secondary data analysis refers to the field of education, participation in knowledge-intensive activities, hierarchical status, and pay gap of highly educated women in selected European countries compared to men.

Field of education, participation in knowledge-intensive activities and hierarchical status of highly educated women

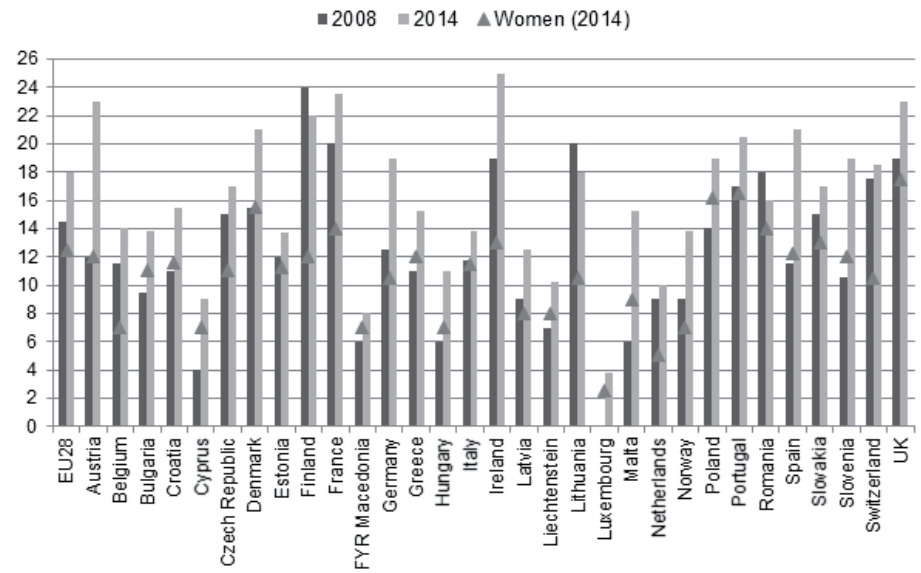
The overall employment rate for women aged 20-64 in EU-28 reached 65.5% in the third quarter of 2016, while the employment rate for men of the same age stood at 77.4% (European Commission, 2017: 9). Women constitute the majority of part-time workers in the EU, with 34.9% of women working part-time against only 8.6%

of men (European Commission, 2014: 2).

At the same time, women are increasingly better educated than men. However, prevailing gender stereotypes still shape male and female choices concerning the preferred fields of study. In the EU, women represent only 37.5% of students pursuing science, mathematics, and computing construction degrees (Eurostat, 2011). Despite the growth of female tertiary graduates in science over the past few years, women still engage in different fields of study and remain under-represented in science and technology fields in all Member States (see Figure 1). The share of women in these fields declines further at the postgraduate level, and during the transition to the workplace. Moreover, in 2012 women accounted for 47.0% of top-level graduates (ISCED 6: post-graduate programmes above master's level) and in 2013 they held only 35.5% of total research positions (Eurostat, 2016b).

Figure 1

Tertiary graduates in science and technology in European countries (% of total graduates), 2008 and 2014



Source: Eurostat (2016a).

In the EU-28, the number of people employed in knowledge-intensive activities[1] represented as a share of total employment increased slightly from 34.2% in 2008 to 35.9% in 2014 (Eurostat, 2016b). As a general trend, between 2008 and 2014 the employment share in knowledge-intensive activities increased in all Member

[1] An activity is classified as knowledge-intensive if employed tertiary educated persons (according to ISCED 97 levels 5+6 and ISCED 2011 levels 5 to 8) represent more than 33% of the total employment in that activity (Eurostat, 2016d).

States (except for Italy, which maintained the same level). Countries where the share increased substantially were Luxembourg and Croatia (5.7 percentage points each), followed by Ireland, Portugal, Estonia, Spain, Cyprus, Malta, Greece, Slovenia, Latvia, Denmark and the Czech Republic (Eurostat, 2016b). All of these countries experienced a period of continuous relative growth of 3.0 to 5.0 percentage points. In 2014, the female employment rate in total knowledge-intensive activities in EU-28 was 44%, exceeding the male share in all countries. In selected Southeast Europe (SEE) countries, percentage higher than EU-28 average was reported in Hungary and Romania, while in Croatia this share was slightly lower than EU-28 average (see Table 2). However, only 13.3% of women were employed in EU knowledge-intensive business enterprises, compared with 14.5% of men, highlighting the need for more efforts towards gender mainstreaming in the business sector (Eurostat, 2016b).

Table 2

The share of women in knowledge-intensive activities in EU-28 and selected SEE (%), 2008-2014

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
EU-28 (average)	42.7	43.5	43.7	43.8	43.9	43.9	44.0
Austria	41.0	42.1	42.7	41.9	42.6	43.5	43.5
Bulgaria	33.3	33.7	34.7	34.8	34.9	35.5	36.2
Croatia	**35.7**	**36.2**	**37.4**	**37.0**	**37.9**	**41.0**	**42.4**
Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	31.0	32.4	30.6	31.1
Greece	39.6	39.6	40.0	40.3	41.6	42.8	42.2
Hungary	44.0	44.8	44.9	44.6	44.4	44.8	44.4
Italy	41.6	42.0	41.9	41.9	40.8	40.7	41.0
Romania	24.2	25.2	25.7	26.1	25.6	25.7	25.2
Slovakia	40.1	41.2	42.3	43.3	42.3	41.5	41.7
Slovenia	41.0	41.5	43.4	44.7	46.3	45.0	44.5

Note: n.a. – not available
Source: Eurostat (2016a).

Empowering women in tertiary education and enhancing their employment opportunities in the R&D sector is an essential part of EU's research and innovation policy (Eurostat, 2016b). Improving gender equality in science education could promote research, innovation and ultimately long-term growth by increasing the number of scientists and engineers, and it is important for reducing occupational segmentation in the labour force and for improving gender equity in the labour market (Eurostat, 2016b).

Concerning the vertical occupational distribution of highly-educated women, they are under-represented in senior positions, in particular at top levels. Data from October 2016 show that women still account for less than one in four (23.9%) board members in the largest publicly listed companies registered in EU Member States and just for 19.9% in Croatia (European Commission, 2017: 28). However, since October 2012, the proportion of women occupying board chairs has increased from 2.8% to 7.7%, and there has been a small

rise in the proportion of women CEOs (from 3.3% to 5.7%) (European Commission, 2017: 29).

Pay gap of highly educated women

A large part of empirical studies on labour market gender inequalities focuses on the wage gap. It reflects ongoing discrimination and inequalities in the labour market which, in practice, mainly affect women.

The gender pay gap, defined as the difference between the average gross hourly earnings of male and female paid employees as a percentage of average gross hourly earnings of male paid employees, varies across Europe. In 2014 it was below 10.0% in Italy, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovenia, but wider than 20.0% in Czech Republic and Slovakia (Eurostat, 2016a). Although the overall gender pay gap has narrowed in the last decade, in some countries the national gender pay gap has actually been widening (e.g. Portugal and Romania) (Eurostat, 2016a). The gender pay gap exists even though women do better at school and university than men – in 2012 in the EU 83% of young women reached at least upper secondary school education, compared to 77.6% of men, and women represented 60% of university graduates (European Commission, 2014: 2).

Across the EU economy gender pay gap was 17.3% in 2008, 16.2% in 2011 and 16.4% in 2012 (European Commission, 2014: 12). According to the data available for selected EU countries, on average women earned 13.4% less than men in 2014. However, from 2008 a decreasing gender pay gap across EU countries can be observed.

Furthermore, the gender pay gap is generally much lower for new labour market entrants and tends to widen with age. It might increase with age as a result of the career interruptions women experience during their working life, particularly older women unable to benefit from specific equality measures which did not yet exist when they started to work (Eurostat, 2016c). More to it, differences among age groups can have different patterns across countries.

Education might play an important role in shaping the gender pay gap. The European Commission (2005) indeed reports that education is the most important observed characteristic explaining the wage inequality between men and women. Therefore, we analysed the average gross hourly wages of women and men, and the gender pay gap by the level of education, based on the last available data (see Table 3). The data were gathered and calculated using the Structure of Earnings Survey (SES), which provides accurate and harmonised data on earnings in EU Member States, Candidate Countries and EFTA countries[2]. The 4-yearly SES microdata sets are available for reference years 2002, 2006 and lastly for 2010. The table, therefore, reveals that, as a general rule, earnings increase in line with a person's level of education, with men's earnings always being higher than those of women within the same education level.

[2] The SES is a large enterprise sample survey providing detailed and comparable information on the relationships between the level of remuneration and individual characteristics of employees (sex, age, occupation, length of service, highest education level attained, etc.) and those of their employer (economic activity, size and location of the enterprise) (Eurostat, 2017). The statistics of the SES refer to enterprises with at least 10 employees operating in all areas of the economy except public administration defined by Statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community (NACE) (Eurostat, 2017).

Table 3
Mean hourly earnings by gender and educational attainment level, in euro, 2010

	Pre-primary and primary education			Secondary education			Tertiary education		
	Men	Women	Gender pay gap (%)	Men	Women	Gender pay gap (%)	Men	Women	Gender pay gap (%)
EU-28	10.1	8.3	18.1	12.5	10.5	16.4	22.0	16.9	23.3
EU-15	10.7	8.9	17.1	14.3	11.9	16.7	24.5	18.8	23.2
Austria	10.6	8.8	16.9	13.1	10.7	17.9	-	-	-
Belgium	15.3	12.6	18.0	16.2	14.1	13.2	33.3	27.0	18.9
Bulgaria	1.4	1.2	14.0	1.6	1.3	20.6	3.7	2.9	19.5
Croatia	4.2	3.4	17.6	4.6	4.1	12.4	11.2	9.6	14.0
Cyprus	9.4	6.6	30.4	9.6	6.8	29.3	21.5	17.9	16.8
Czech Republic	3.9	3.1	20.2	4.6	3.8	17.3	9.2	6.9	25.3
Denmark	22.0	19.8	9.8	25.3	21.2	16.4	36.8	30.8	16.2
Estonia	3.3	2.2	34.2	4.3	3.0	30.8	8.7	6.7	23.6
Finland	17.0	13.5	21.0	17.2	13.7	20.4	27.6	22.5	18.7
France	12.5	11.2	10.3	14.4	12.6	12.6	25.9	20.7	20.3
Germany	-	-	-	14.3	12.0	16.4	-	-	-
Greece	9.3	7.5	20.1	9.6	7.7	19.7	15.8	13.1	17.2
Hungary	3.1	2.7	12.6	3.5	3.0	13.2	-	-	-
Ireland	16.5	14.3	13.2	19.4	15.8	18.3	-	-	-
Italy	10.8	9.1	16.0	13.4	11.8	11.7	25.8	21.5	16.7
Latvia	3.1	2.3	26.5	3.1	2.4	22.6	6.6	5.3	20.2
Lithuania	1.9	1.6	18.8	2.7	2.1	21.3	5.5	4.7	14.6
Luxembourg	15.3	13.4	12.4	17.7	17.2	2.6	37.8	30.0	20.6
Malta	6.1	5.3	12.9	8.2	7.0	14.6	-	-	-
Netherlands	12.5	10.6	15.3	15.3	12.8	15.9	29.6	23.9	19.3
Poland	3.6	2.8	24.5	3.6	3.1	12.9	8.7	7.0	20.0
Portugal	5.3	4.0	25.1	7.3	5.3	27.6	18.2	15.3	16.1
Romania	1.5	1.4	6.0	1.9	1.6	16.1	5.0	4.2	16.9
Slovakia	-	-	-	3.8	3.2	16.1	7.6	6.1	20.4
Slovenia	6.3	5.4	13.9	6.9	6.3	8.6	17.7	15.1	14.4
Spain	9.7	7.5	22.8	10.9	8.4	22.9	17.0	14.1	17.4
Sweden	15.9	13.5	15.4	16.9	14.7	13.5	22.3	17.2	23.0
United Kingdom	-	9.1	-	14.9	11.7	21.5	24.2	18.8	22.3

Source: Eurostat (2017).

The effect on the pay gap is not straightforward, however. The pay gap is on average higher amongst people with the highest qualifications in the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Latvia, Luxembourg, Sweden and United Kingdom. It ranges from 14% in Croatia and 14.6% in Lithuania to 25.3% in the Czech Republic. Furthermore, the narrower pay gap amongst those with lower education levels may partly be explained by women's participation in the labour market, since women who have received little education join the labour market less frequently and are also more likely to take career breaks or give up paid work in order to look after children (Institute for the equality of women and men, 2010). The average earnings of women in this group are probably higher than they would be if less educated women were in the labour market as well (Institute for the equality of women and men, 2010).

Career-building and individual pay negotiations amongst those with the highest qualifications play an important role, since they often cause a widening of the pay gap (Institute for the equality of women and men, 2010: 81). Additionally, as already mentioned, women and men do not enrol same studies and this might be reflected in the pay gap as each field of education is rated differently in the labour market (Institute for the equality of women and men, 2010: 82). Finally, despite women's high levels of education, equal or even superior to men's, women find it harder to obtain jobs with the best salaries and come up against the "glass ceiling" (Institute for the equality of women and men, 2010: 81).

HIGHLY EDUCATED WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT FACTORS IN CROATIA – PRIMARY DATA

Methodology

Starting from the premise that highly educated women suffer less inequality in the workplace and in their private lives, and in order to assess their perceptions on that issue, we conducted an on-line survey on a sample of highly educated women from diverse industries. We designed a questionnaire that, apart from demographic data (age, marital status, number of children, level and field of education, hierarchical position, working experience, and industry), consisted of five sections of questions related to our research problem. Questions capture not only the perceptions of factors influencing women's careers, but also critical incidents regarding gender inequality issues our female respondents have experienced, and male respondents have witnessed or heard of.

We used a snowball-sampling procedure, ending up with 675 female respondents, which represent 0.28% of a total number of highly educated women employed in Croatia (Eurostat, 2016a). Women with social sciences background are over-represented in our sample (69%), as a consequence of traditional over-representation of women in that educational field (e.g. European Institute for Gender Equality, 2013). To compare women's perceptions with those of men, we collected responses to the same questions from a sample of 177 highly educated males. Samples' characteristics are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Samples' characteristics

		Female sample (n = 675)	Male sample (n = 177)
Average age (yrs)		40 (SD = 9.6)	42 (SD = 11.8)
Marital status (% of sample)	Married/living with partner	66.4	74.6
	Divorced	6.2	2.3
	Widow/widower	1.6	0.6
	Single	25.8	22.6
Number of children (% of sample)	0	40.8	31.3
	1	22.1	22.1
	2	30.4	31.8
	3	6.1	11.4
	4+	0.6	3.4
Education level (% of sample)	Baccalaureus	9.8	7.3
	Master	54.5	50.3
	Post-graduate specialization	12.9	6.2
	Master of science	11.3	13.6
	Ph.D.	11.6	22.6
Area of education (% of sample)	Social sciences	69.0	65.5
	Humanities	6.4	0.6
	Technical sciences	13.0	27.1
	Natural sciences	4.1	2.8
	Medical sciences	5.9	3.4
Hierarchical level (% of sample)	Top management	19.1	26.6
	Middle management	23.7	26.0
	Lower management	14.7	7.3
	Non-managerial position	42.5	40.1
Average number of working years		15 (SD = 9.6)	18 (SD = 11.8)
Industry (% of sample)	Financial and insurance services	14.4	11.3
	Education	14.1	22.6
	Scientific, technical and professional industries	8.9	8.5
	Public services	8.6	4.0
	Other services	9.3	9.0
	Information and communication	7.9	6.8
	Construction	6.8	7.9
	Trade	5.6	4.0
	Medical and social care	4.9	2.8
	Other	19.5	23.1

The data were analysed with IBM SPSS Statistics 23 by using descriptive statistics to calculate relative frequencies and mean values, and by using inferential statistics (chi-square tests, Spearman's Rho correlation coefficients and Mann-Witney U tests depending on the type of variables) to test for statistical significances of demographic variables, as well as to test the existence of statistically significant differences in women's and men's responses.

Additionally, in order to enrich our recommendations deriving from theoretical and empirical research results, we interviewed five key informants from MNCs with developed gender equality practices doing business in Croatia. They were HRM or general managers from a telecommunication company, fast-moving consumer goods company, public postal services company, B2B construction company, and tobacco company. Companies they work for are equality-oriented, which is visible from their UN Global Compact annual reports, their support of The European Social Charter or different certificates and prizes that they got at both national and international levels, like EQUAL-SALARY and MAMFORCE COMPANY©.

Results

At the beginning of the questionnaire, we asked our female respondents to assess their satisfaction with their career development in general. On average, they graded their satisfaction with 3.6 on a scale from 1 to 5 (SD = 0.87), revealing that they were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied with their careers. However, 65.5% of them confirmed that they were satisfied or extremely satisfied, while only 13.3% of them said that they were unsatisfied or extremely unsatisfied with their careers. Concerning demographic variables, their satisfaction increases with the level of their education ($\chi^2 = 42.437, p < 0.001$), and hierarchical level ($\chi^2 = 74.847, p < 0.001$).

As far as timeliness of their career development is concerned, 52.1% stated that they were satisfied or extremely satisfied, 23.4% that they were unsatisfied or extremely unsatisfied, while the rest expressed neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction. Their average satisfaction was 3.3 on a scale from 1 to 5 (SD = 0.99), meaning that they are on average neither satisfied nor unsatisfied with their career timeline. Again, their satisfaction increases with their hierarchical level ($\chi^2 = 105.403, p < 0.001$).

When asked to assess which of the personal, organizational and social factors negatively influenced their careers, the majority of our female respondents reported minimal negative or no negative influence. They expressed their opinions on a scale from being extremely negative to not being negative, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Women's perception of diverse factors influencing their career development (% of sample)

	Extremely negatively influenced	Negatively influenced	Minimally negatively influenced	Did not negatively influence
Personal factors				
1. Balancing between private/family and business part of life	4.0	29.2	38.5	28.3
2. Traditional view of women's role in own family (being dominantly a housewife, wife, mother, etc.)	4.6	15.7	30.1	49.6
3. Personal decision to refuse a job with many extra working hours and travelling, etc.	7.0	25.6	29.0	38.4
4. Personal decision to refuse a top management position	3.0	17.0	27.1	52.9
5. Lack of time for business networking	10.4	29.8	32.4	27.4
Organizational factors				
6. Lack of organizational policies that enable work-life balance (flexible working hours, job-sharing, childcare, etc.)	9.2	21.6	34.5	34.7
7. Lack of empathy for working mothers within organizations (overtime and travel demands, business meetings after working hours, etc.)	8.0	19.4	31.6	41.0
8. Employer's aversion to employ women	4.7	11.7	23.9	59.7
9. Employer's aversion to invest in women's training and development	6.8	14.4	22.4	56.4
10. Employer's aversion to promote women up the ladder	10.7	20.9	28.1	40.3
11. Lack of gender diversity awareness trainings for both men and women	7.0	22.5	29.2	41.3
12. "Glass ceiling"	11.7	24.7	28.7	34.8
13. Lack of women mentoring programs	7.6	23.1	31.1	38.2
Social factors				
14. Traditional view of women's role in society (being dominantly a housewife, wife, mother, etc.)	10.7	25.6	28.0	35.7
15. Lack of quota system that enables greater share of women (in politics, managerial or supervisory boards, top positions, etc.)	9.3	17.0	27.9	45.8
16. Less visible female role models in society	8.4	24.3	30.8	36.4
17. Stereotyping that women are emotionally over-sensitive	11.1	26.1	30.2	32.6
18. Assessment of women based on their appearance, and not on their knowledge, skills or abilities	11.1	24.1	32.0	32.7
19. Men's beliefs that women are less capable of performing the most demanding jobs (managers, politicians, physicians, etc.)	13.5	26.7	31.7	28.1
20. Women's beliefs that women are less capable of performing the most demanding jobs (managers, politicians, physicians, etc.)	8.7	19.7	33.5	38.1

However, our female respondents perceive that some factors did negatively influence their careers. The most negative **personal factor**, rated as extremely negative or negative by 40.2% of respondents, is their inability to find enough time for business networking. The most negative **organizational factor** is "glass ceiling", which was perceived by 36.4% of respondents as an extremely negative or negative career factor. The most negative **social factor** is the perception that women are less capable of performing the most demanding jobs, as perceived by 40.2% of respondents.

Some of the evaluated personal and organizational factors were significantly differently perceived depending on the demographic characteristics of our respondents (see Table 6). Single women perceive the respective items to have the least negative influence on their careers, while the perception of the negative influence of employer's aversion to invest in women's training and development decreases with their education level. In addition, there is a negative and statistically significant, although week to medium, correlation between women's perceptions of the influence of work-life balance possibilities, personal decision not to work extra hours, personal decision not to take a top management position, lack of time for networking, lack of organizational policies that enable work-life balance and lack of empathy for working mothers (items 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7), and the number of children they have (for all $p < 0.001$). The more children women have, the more negatively they perceive these career factors.

Table 6

Significant differences in women's answers according to their demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics	Items	Statistics
Marital status	Work-life balance	$\chi^2 = 43.833, p < 0.001$
	Personal decision not to work extra hours	$\chi^2 = 34.796, p < 0.001$
	Lack of time for networking	$\chi^2 = 37.434, p < 0.001$
	Lack of organizational policies that enable work-life balance	$\chi^2 = 25.555, p = 0.002$
	Lack of empathy for working mothers	$\chi^2 = 43.262, p < 0.001$
Education level	Employer's aversion to invest in women's training and development	$\chi^2 = 31.575, p = 0.002$

Furthermore, female and male respondents have different perceptions of the influence of particular factors on women's careers. We confirmed statistical differences in a series of items ($p < 0.001$), with men perceiving the impact of various career factors more negatively, except for the following items: lack of personal time for business networking (item 5), lack of mentoring programs for women (item 13), less visible female role models in society (item 16), stereotype that women are emotionally over-sensitive (item 17), and men's beliefs that women are less capable of performing the most demanding jobs (item 19). These five career factors were assessed similarly by men and women.

In addition, we asked our female respondents to report whether they ever found themselves in certain undesirable situations concerning gender inequality. As presented in Table 7, the majority of them did not have negative gender related experiences. However, some women experienced being treated differently than men (experienced by more than one third of respondents) – salary inequality, and stereotypes about the traditional woman's role of being a mother (items 1, 2 and 7). These results correspond to the previously cited women's career obstacles perceptions.

Table 7
Experiences of gender inequality (% of sample)

I have experienced… (WOMEN) *I have heard or experienced that my female colleagues encounter…* (MEN)		Women		Men	
		YES	NO	YES	NO
1.	…that, comparing to my salary, my male colleague gets better salary for the same job.	47.3	52.7	29.9	70.1
2.	…that, during my job interview, my potential employer asked if I am married and do I plan to have children.	44.7	55.3	66.7	33.3
3.	…that, during my job interview, I've been told that management positions are "more appropriate for men than women".	15.3	84.7	23.2	76.8
4.	…that I've been asked how my new and better-paid job corresponds with my private plans.	29.8	70.2	29.4	70.6
5.	…to be described as *less feminine* (tough like man) when being persistent about my views during discussions.	30.1	69.9	22.6	77.4
6.	…not to be asked to join social gatherings organized after working hours, because of my family duties.	21.5	78.5	20.9	79.1
7.	…to be asked who is looking after my children when I work after regular working hours.	36.3	63.7	42.9	57.1
8.	…that my boss got angry when I announced pregnancy.	13.2	86.8	28.8	71.2

Some of the experiences of our female respondents presented in Table 7 depend on their demographic characteristics (Table 8). Furthermore, the correlation matrix revealed that there is a medium to strong correlation between the number of children and female respondents' experiences of being asked to join social gatherings (item 6), being asked about child-care after regular working hours (item 7), and boss's reaction regarding pregnancy (item 8). Women with children/more children report these occurrences more frequently.

Table 8

Significant differences in experiences of gender inequality according to women's demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics	Items	Statistics	Differences in experiences
Marital status	item 5	$\chi^2 = 16.395, p = 0.001$	The majority of married women (75.2%) did not experience being described as less feminine compared to other groups.
	item 6	$\chi^2 = 45.392, p < 0.001$	Compared to other groups, the majority of single women did not experience being left out of social gatherings because of family duties (93.3%), being asked who is taking care of their children (86.2%), and did not experience boss getting angry due to their pregnancy (91.1%).
	item 7	$\chi^2 = 95.220, p < 0.001$	
	item 8	$\chi^2 = 22.534, p < 0.001$	
Industry	item 1	$\chi^2 = 75.123, p < 0.001$	Compared to women from other industries, more women from the construction industry (61.9%), information and communication industry (57.1%) and financial and insurance services (56.1%) experienced that their male colleagues were paid better for the same job.
Education level	item 1	$\chi^2 = 31.575, p < 0.001$	In comparison to other groups, women with Bachelor's degree experienced their male colleagues to be paid better for the same job more often (60.8%), while women with doctoral degree experienced the situation rarely (19.5%).
Hierarchical level	item 5	$\chi^2 = 50.223, p < 0.001$	In comparison to other groups, women in lower and middle level management positions experienced to be described as less feminine (around 30% in each group) and to be left out from social gatherings because of family duties more often (around 28% in each group).
	item 6	$\chi^2 = 16.813, p = 0.001$	

The analysis of our male respondents' answers (see Table 7) shows that in general they encountered situations of women being discriminated at work to a smaller extent. Moreover, they provided statistically significantly different answers compared to women regarding three situations. They claimed that they have not witnessed or heard about variances in salaries between men and women (item 1 → $\chi^2 = 17.093$, $p < 0.001$), but they admitted having witnessed or heard of women being asked for plans about having children (item 2 → $\chi^2 = 29.971, p < 0.001$), and of bosses not having empathy for women announcing their pregnancy (item 8 → $\chi^2 = 24.942, p < 0.001$). However, their answers on the rest of critical incidences related to gender issues (five items) do not differ significantly from women's answers.

Finally, our female respondents believe that their careers are the consequence of both external and personal circumstances (47.6%) or primarily a consequence of their personal choice of balancing their private and business lives (43.6%). Only a small

percentage of them assign their career path primarily to external circumstances such as the position of women in society, "glass ceiling" or similar (8.9%). Demographic variables were not found to be statistically significant for their answers. At the same time, 66.1% of our male respondents perceive that women's careers are the result of both external and personal circumstances, and only 31.1% of them believe that it is a consequence of their own choices and efforts. Consequently, as expected, the difference between women's and men's responses is statistically significant (χ^2 = 21.475, $p < 0.001$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Empirical contribution

In order to assess the position of highly-educated women in the labour market and in the workplace, we explored gender equality on two levels. We conducted a secondary (macro) research within the broader EU context, and a primary (micro) research on a sample of highly educated women in Croatia.

Secondary data analysis revealed that although still present, educational, horizontal, vertical, and pay segregation of women in EU is decreasing, especially for highly educated women – in the last decade there has been a growth of female tertiary graduates, the female employment rate in knowledge-intensive activities started to exceed the men's share, and there is a decreasing trend of gender hierarchical and pay gap.

Primary research revealed that highly educated women in our sample do not perceive various social, organizational and personal factors as significant obstacles for their career development. In 60% to 84% of cases they assess these factors not to influence or minimally influence their careers, assuring a solid ground for *accepting* our *first hypothesis*. When asked about their experiences of gender inequality, except for pay gap and discrimination because of the intention or having children (experienced by around 45% of women), the majority of our female respondents revealed that they had not experienced it (not experienced by around 60% to 90% of women per item). They have not been under-valued because of their gender or judged as less feminine if being determined, they did not experience undesired interest in their private lives or family duties, or a situation that their pregnancy was being accepted with irritation. This enables us to *accept* our *second hypothesis*.

However, it has to be commented that around a third of our respondents still believe that balancing private and business life, refusing more time-demanding jobs, lack of time for networking and lack of female role models in society, "glass ceiling", and stereotypes about women's traditional roles, over-sensitivity, appearance and lower capabilities compared to men, negatively influence their career development to some extent. The aforementioned implies that our female respondents, due to personal-situation specifics, lack of organizational policies or still immanent prejudices in society, have to make a considerable effort in order to balance their personal, family and business lives. This is in line with Seierstad and Kirton's (2015) conclusion that work-life balance is complex and demands different sources of support at the national, workplace and private (family and friends) level.

Furthermore, our findings correspond to Burke and Singh's (2014) finding that levels of both career and family priority are associated with personal demographics. Especially marital status proved to be a relevant demographic variable shaping

women's perceptions. However, number of children, field of education, hierarchical position and industry of work were found to impact women's perceptions only to a minor degree, while age, level of education and working experience were not found to relate with respondent's answers at all.

Our third hypothesis dealt with influential "decision-makers" for career tracks of highly educated female employees. The majority of women respondents do believe that it is, at least partially, their choice to stay or leave the career pipeline. An internal locus of career control was revealed irrespective of respondents' marital status or motherhood, which provides *support* for our *third hypothesis*.

Finally, we found that men in general have significantly different perceptions of obstacles women face throughout their professional careers. Although they report that they have encountered discriminating behaviours towards women in their working environments at a lower extent, they perceive explored personal, organizational and social obstacles for women's careers more negatively than women themselves. This implies that our *fourth hypothesis* has to be *rejected*. Fortunately, a research done by Elamin and Omar (2010) reveals that single, unemployed, young and educated males report less traditional attitudes towards working females, as well that age was found to be the most important predictor of males' attitudes towards working females, which brings optimism for future generations.

Theoretical contribution and limitations

This research contributes to the prior literature by giving an insight in highly educated women's position and prospect in the workforce. Previous research mostly analysed gender differences and inequality in terms of education, horizontal and vertical/hierarchical occupational segregation, compensations, work values and preferences in general, while highly educated women, as a specific workforce group, were rarely explored in that context. Our research fills in the gap in this area.

Moreover, our research setting is Croatia, a young market economy within the EU, but with a history of communist business and governmental model, where women were treated – at least on a declarative level – as equal to men. Unlike our research, the majority of previous research dealt with gender-equality issues in western countries and developed economies. Our context is a country which is a successor of a former communist system present in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Equality in politics and working spheres was the underlying principle of that system. Unlike in liberal democratic systems, women's employment in politics, science and engineering was encouraged and supported by institutional frameworks. During communist times women's participation in the labour market in the CEE countries has been the highest in the world, and their representation at managerial levels, in political administration and scientific fields has been high compared to European equivalents (Wirth, 2001). However, even during socialist times the most valued and best-paid skilled jobs in heavy industries were staffed by men, while clerical, administrative and service jobs, filled primarily with women, were ranked at the bottom and paid significantly less (Metcalfe and Afanassieva, 2005).

All studies are subject to limitations, and five such limitations are reported here. First, the contextual research framework, apart from being our point of differentiation, is a limitation when discussing our research results. It is probable that our res-

pondents' socialist "family legacy" influences their general opinions and attitudes regarding women's position in the family, organizations and society. The results, therefore, may be more rooted in the past, then in today's reality. The second limitation refers to the fact that our female respondents were neither asked about the employment status of their partners (and whose career has priority), nor about the level of their partner's participation in family responsibilities. This should be taken into account when analysing how marital status affects women's career and family priorities. Third, as self-reports have been gathered, there is always a question of subjectivity. Fourth, although our results are indicative since 0.28% of highly educated employed female population in Croatia is covered, the limitation is that we used convenience sampling. Finally, we used correlation/relationship analysis, which does not reveal causations.

Practical implications

Pološki (2001) points that, since women have to coordinate work with family responsibilities, new and improved thinking and acting philosophy toward women in organizations, and better organizational policies and programs concerning women became a necessity. This was confirmed by our key informants from equality-oriented MNCs. They reported that their main goals are gender-balanced management teams, and helping their employees balance their private and business lives. This corresponds to one of our fieldwork findings – that a life in balance seems to be a great endeavour of highly educated working women.

Altogether, the implications for managers, based both on quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interviews) findings, could be clustered on two levels: (1) formal level – inclusion of gender-equality in core organizational values, meaning that organizations support gender equality in everyday communication and cooperation; development of organizational programs oriented toward gender diversity awareness, like seminars, forums, intranet or web sites with the content that promotes gender equality; supporting and sponsoring programs that empower women, both within organizations and in civil society; and (2) practical level – mentorship and networking programs for women; development of organizational policies that enable work-life balance (flexible working hours, telework, job-sharing, child care, paid time-off for special family events (i.e. first school day), financial support for mothers during maternity leave, "Friday in slippers" or bringing children to work in order for them to understand what parent's responsibilities and business duties are).

All the aforementioned suggestions could help highly educated working women to "have it all" – a high commitment and prosperous career, and a fulfilling home and family life. They enable women not to choose between family and career priorities, but to successfully manage both work and family roles.

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Sažetak

BITI ILI NE BITI ŽENA? PERCEPCIJA VISOKOOBRAZOVANIH ŽENA O RODNOJ JEDNAKOSTI NA RADNOM MJESTU

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Polazišna točka rada je da visokoobrazovane žene trpe manje nejednakosti na radnom mjestu. Kako bismo to testirali, provedena su primarna i sekundarna istraživanja. Sekundarni podatci odnose se na područje obrazovanja, sudjelovanje u aktivnostima koje se temelje na znanju, statusu u hijerarhiji i razlici u plaćama visokoobrazovanih žena u odnosu na plaće muškaraca u odabranim europskim zemljama, dok primarni podatci prikazuju percepcije visokoobrazovanih žena o kontekstualnim čimbenicima koji utječu na karijere žena i o osobnim kritičnim iskustvima u pogledu jednakosti. Primarno istraživanje provedeno je na uzorku od 675 visokoobrazovanih žena u Hrvatskoj. Analiziraju se statističke razlike prema demografskim čimbenicima ispitanica, te se rezultati uspoređuju s percepcijama visokoobrazovanih muškaraca (n=177).

Sekundarni podatci pokazuju da je rodna segregacija manje prisutna među visokoobrazovanim ženama. Općenito, primarni podatci ukazuju na to da visokoobrazovane žene ne smatraju da kontekstualni čimbenici negativno utječu na njihove karijere, čak ni onda kada su osobno iskusile neke rodno uvjetovane neugodnosti. Rad zaključuju preporuke o inicijativama za rodnu jednakost na temelju rezultata istraživanja i razgovori s voditeljima odjela za upravljanje ljudskim potencijalima i generalnim direktorima multinacionalnih poduzeća s najboljim praksama rodne jednakosti.

Ključne riječi: EU, Hrvatska, percepcije, rodna jednakost, rodna segregacija, visokoobrazovane žene.