

CARE GAP BETWEEN PAID PARENTAL LEAVE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ELIGIBILITY IN CROATIA

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Introduction

Gender equality

- Gender inequality?

Labour market

- Education
- Employment

Gender roles

- Motherhood penalty

Being a mother on the labour market

Women with children are exposed to a greater risk of unemployment, find it harder to keep a job and find it more difficult to return to the labour market after being absent (Gelo et al., 2010). An increase in the number of children in a family leads to a gap in the employment rate and activity rate between men and women (Mills et al., 2014, Sikirić, 2021).

PROBLEM: While discontinuing employment reduces women's economic independence and their **future social security** in retirement (Fultz and Stenhilber, 2004; according to Matković, 2008).

Many families cannot afford to live on a single wage.

These circumstances lead to **gender inequality** in other social segments as well due to women's greater financial dependence on men.

Solution?



Changing
gender roles



Public
services/policies

Paid leave

- Enable parents to temporarily leave their jobs to take care of children, without losing their employment.
- Problematic: mainly taken by women – WHY?
- Long-extended leave reduces women's job continuity, productivity, salary and the likelihood of returning to the labour market (Sikirić, 2021).

Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

- These services mitigate the incompatibility of work and motherhood because the care and education of children are given to an organised system of preschool childcare institutions.
- Problem: lack of capacity?

It is essential to align ECEC system with the parental leave system in order to prevent **a time gap between the conclusion of paid parental leave and the commencement of a child's participation in an ECEC program, commonly referred to in the literature as the care gap.**



WHY?

Care gap

- In Iceland, for example, the care gap leads to mothers taking longer leaves and experiencing reduced income, while fathers use only their earmarked leave (Farstad, 2014).
- Studies from Iceland show that to bridge the care gap, most parents turn to private child-minders, extended family support, or reduced working hours, **with mothers more likely than fathers to decrease their labour market participation** (Ingólfssdóttir, 2013; Jónsdóttir, 2007; Ingólfssdóttir & Gíslason, 2016).
- Similar challenges are observed in Poland, **where the care gap exacerbates gender inequalities** (Suwada, 2021).

What can we expect in Croatia?

Gender stereotypes

- 1 Men earn more than women because their jobs are more demanding (% , 15+, 2024)

Tend to agree or totally agree

Croatia		EU	
Women	Men	Women	Men
45	62	36	45

- 2 If childcare services are not available, mothers should stay at home with the child and fathers should prioritise their job (% , 16-74, 2024)

Agree or strongly agree

41	41	33	42
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- 3 A man's most important role is to earn money (% , 15+, 2024)

Tend to agree or totally agree

43	54	40	45
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- Source: EIGE, 2025

ECEC AND PARENTAL LEAVE IN CROATIA



- Paid Parental leave: lasts six months for the first and second child, or up to 30 months for twins or a third child **if only one parent uses the leave**, and may be used until the child turns eight (Croatian Health Insurance Fund, 2025).
- However, the structure of the ECEC system and its restrictive annual enrolments, combined with age requirements, often force parents to use their leave only up to the child's first birthday, after which immediate access to ECEC is not guaranteed.
 - Although the Act permits enrolment from six months, in practice, most municipalities admit children only after their first birthday and only once per year, typically during an enrolment period in April or May for the following pedagogic year beginning 1 September.
- **This misalignment is the primary driver of the care gap in Croatia.**



The aim of this research:

- *is to examine whether a time gap exists between the end of paid parental leave and the availability of accessible, affordable ECEC for families with young children in Croatia.*
- *It also seeks to determine the predictors of this care gap and to explore the strategies parents employ to bridge this period.*

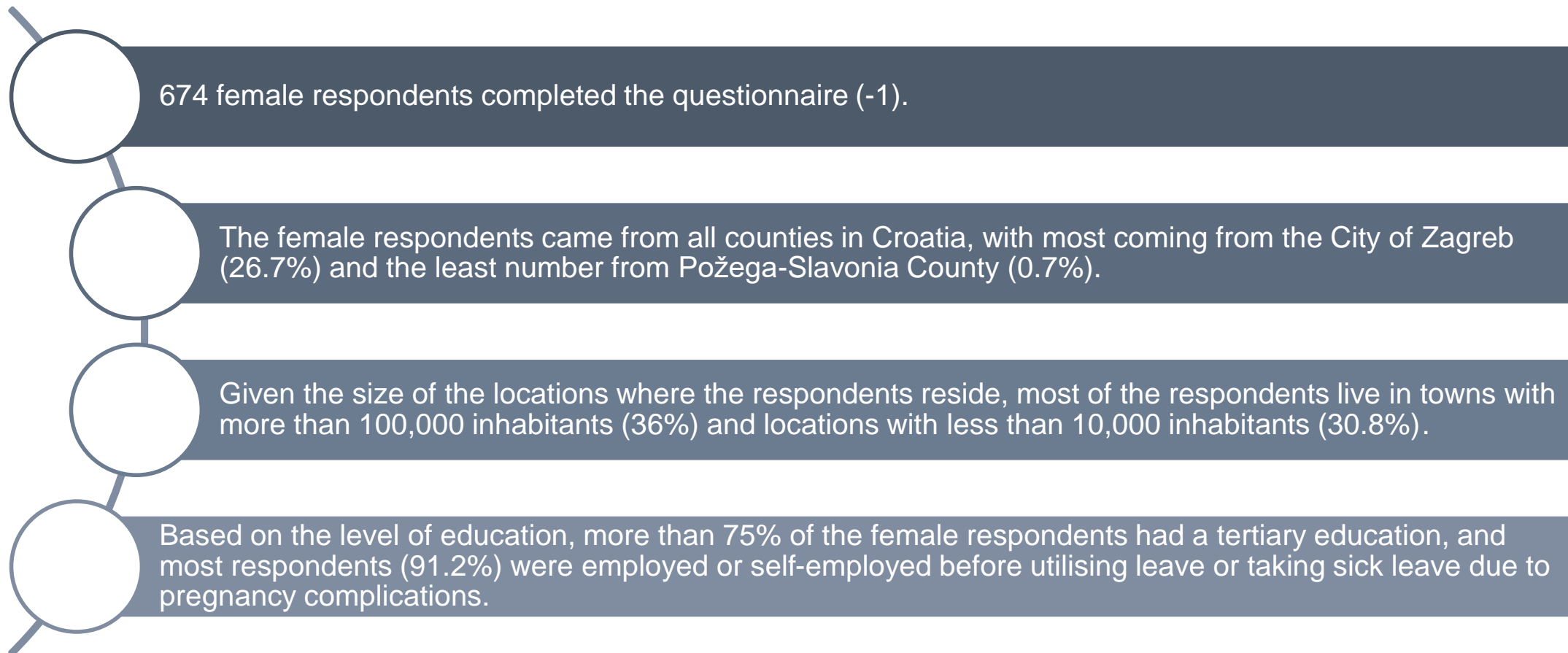
Methodology



Online questionnaire

- The research was conducted on a **suitable sample**, and the researched target population was women with children younger than three years of age.
- Data were collected online via an anonymous questionnaire in 2022. Given that the survey was conducted online, **the sample did not include many women with low incomes or low digital skills.**
- Although generalisation of the results to a wider population is limited, a suitable sample for this study is not necessarily limiting, as the aim of the study is primarily to determine **whether there are women in Croatia facing a care gap** that should be considered in the design of future work-life balance policies and strategies.

SAMPLE – Basic characteristics



195 respondents with children younger than 12 months of age

Do you plan to utilise early childhood education and care services after finishing parental leave?	YES		NO		
	f	%	f	%	
Yes	63	46.0%	18	31.0%	No, because I choose to look after the child myself
Yes, but I have to wait for the start of the new pedagogic year (beginning of September)	68	49.6%	39	67.2%	No, because I have alternatives (e.g., grandparents, hired lady)
Yes, but I am not able to due to other reasons	6	4.4%	1	1.7%	No, due to other reasons
TOTAL	137	100%	58	100%	

- To bridge the existing care gap, the majority of respondents (41,2%) received help from their extended family,
- around 26% of mothers decided to adjusted** their participation in labour market by utilising unpaid leave (11,8%), annual leave (2,9%), working from home (2,9%), staying unemployed (5,9%).
- 14% of respondents stated that the father would adjust** his labour force participation in one of the above-mentioned ways in order to bridge the care gap.
- 10,3% of respondents hired a baby-sitter.

478 respondents with children older than 12 months age

Do you utilise early childhood education and care services?	YES		NO		
	f	%	f	%	
Yes, after finishing parental leave	172	51.7%	35	24.1%	No, because I choose to look after the child myself
Yes, but I had to wait for the start of the new pedagogic year (beginning of September)	123	36.9%	19	13.1%	No, because I was on sick leave to look after my pregnancy or was on extended parental leave
I had planned to do so, but it was too expensive	4	1.2%	85	58.6%	No, because I have alternatives (e.g., grandparents, hired lady)
I had planned to do so, but we are currently on the waiting list (or we were)	34	10.2%	6	4.1%	No, due to other reasons
				100,0	
TOTAL	333	100%	145	%	

Due to the inability to access ECEC services after parental leave ended:

- 43,6% of women received help from their extended family, **35% decided to adapt their professional life to family responsibilities** by taking unpaid leave (9,9%), remaining unemployed (5,5%), using their annual leave (2,2%), quitting their job (1,9%), working from home (1,9%), etc., and only
- **4.3% stated that fathers did the same.**
- 13,7% respondents hired a babysitter.
- In 3.4% of cases, women stated that their partners share the caring responsibilities equally in order to bridge the care gap.

Logistic regression

- The log-odds of experiencing a care gap were modelled as:

$$\log \left(\frac{P(CGAP=1)}{1-P(CGAP=1)} \right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x RSIZE + \beta_2 x CMONTH + \beta_3 x EMP \quad (1)$$

- where β_0 is the intercept, i.e. baseline log-odds when all predictors are zero, and β_1 , β_2 and β_3 are the coefficients for independent variables.
- The dependent variable, care gap (CGAP), was coded dichotomously (1 = care gap present, 0 = no care gap).
- The independent variables included:
 - The size of residence (RSIZE) is an ordinal variable: 1 = LGU with fewer than 10,000 citizens; 2 = LGU with 10,000 to 50,000 citizens; 3 = LGU with 50,000 to 100,000 citizens; and 4 = LGU with more than 100,000 citizens. This variable was included under the assumption that smaller LGUs have lower fiscal capacity and, consequently, lower availability of early childhood education and care (ECEC), increasing the probability of a care gap;
 - The child's month of birth (CMONTH) is an ordinal variable ranging from 1 (January) to 12 (December). This variable was included because enrolment in ECEC typically occurs once a year, and eligibility is determined by the child's age, making birth month a relevant predictor of care gap risk.
 - The respondent's employment status (EMPL) is a binary variable (1 = employed/self-employed, 0 = unemployed/student). Employment status is often used as a criterion for prioritizing ECEC access and was therefore included as a predictor.

Chi-square test results

Care gap was observed in both small and large LGUs. The results of the non-parametric chi-square test of independence indicate an association between the presence of a care gap and LGU size (Pearson $\chi^2 = 6.31$, $p = 0.0974$).

The results of the non-parametric chi-square test of independence indicate a statistically significant association between the month of birth and the likelihood of mothers facing a care gap (Pearson $\chi^2 = 39.81$ Prob = 0.0000). Mothers with children born between February and June were most likely to experience a care gap, while those with children born in September had the lowest probability.

According to the results of the non-parametric chi-square test of independence, there is no statistically significant association between the presence of a care gap and women's employment status (Pearson $\chi^2 = 0.21$ Prob = 0.6467).

Table 1: Logistic Regression Results - Predicting the Presence of a Care Gap

<i>Variables names</i>	<i>Coefficient (b)</i>	<i>Std. Error (SE)</i>	<i>z-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>Odds Ratio (OR)</i>	<i>95% CI for OR</i>
<i>Residence size (LGU)</i>	-0.218	0.081	-2.68	0.007	0.804	0.686 - 0.943
<i>Child's month of birth (CMONTH)</i>	-0.116	0.024	-3.9	0.000	0.890	0.840 - 0.944
<i>Employment status (EMPL)</i>	0.292	0.433	0.67	0.500	1.339	0.573 - 3.128
<i>Constant</i>	0.761	0.495	1.74	0.125	2.140	0.810 - 5.651

Number of obs = 419; Log likelihood = -276.81646; LR chi2(3) = 21.48;
Prob > chi2 = 0.0001; Pseudo R2 = 0.0374

Source: own calculations using STATA/SE 13. 0

The odds ratio of approximately 0.804 suggests that, **all else being equal, each increase in residence size (LGU) is associated with 21% lower odds of care gap (95% CI for OR [0.686 – 0.943]).**

The odds ratio of about 0.890 indicates that, **all else being equal, for each additional month later in the year a child is born, the odds of a care gap decrease by about 11% (95% CI for OR [0.840 – 0.944]).**

Employment status **has a positive coefficient, indicating that, all else being equal, employed respondents may have higher odds of experiencing a care gap than non-employed respondents.** However, this effect is not statistically significant ($p = 0.500$), providing no evidence of a true association between employment status and the likelihood of experiencing a care gap in the population.



Parental attitudes on the role of early childhood education and care services in child development certainly influence the number of children enrolled in formal programs providing early childhood education and care services for preschool children.



According to this research results, 62.9% of respondents viewed that including children younger than three years of age in formal types of childcare had a positive effect on child development.

- Some respondents pointed out that achieving positive results requires ensuring a high pedagogic standard. Also, some mothers believe that children younger than three years of age should attend formal types of childcare only after the second year of life, specifically half-day stays and not all-day stays.

Overall, 22.7% of respondents consider that enrolling children younger than three years of age in early childhood education and care services do not positively affect child development.

The remaining 14.4% could not evaluate whether early childhood education and care services positively affect child development.

Personal experience

Table 2: Main themes and their frequency in participants' responses

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>
<i>Insufficient Capacity and Long Waiting Lists</i>	103
<i>Overcrowded Groups and Staff Shortages</i>	96
<i>Inflexible and Unfair Enrolment Policies</i>	44
<i>Positive Experiences</i>	35
<i>Mismatch with Parental Work Schedules</i>	20
<i>High Costs</i>	19
<i>Reliance on Informal Care</i>	17
<i>Quality of Care and Dedication of Staff</i>	14
<i>Impact on Child and Family Well-being</i>	12

Source: author's calculation

CONCLUSION

Organising and co-funding proper childcare in early childhood by local self-government units ensures the main prerequisites for women to return to the labour market after finishing leave.

Research findings indicate a lack of alignment between Croatia's parental leave system and the availability of institutional ECEC. This care gap poses a significant organizational challenge for parents, particularly mothers, as many women are unable to return to work due to a lack of access to ECEC.

SHORT TERM: local and central authorities should focus on expanding ECEC capacity, particularly in smaller LGUs where families face the highest risk of a care gap. Immediate measures should also include revising enrolment criteria to ensure fairness—such as implementing continuous enrolment throughout the pedagogical year

MEDIUM TERM: policymakers should work to align the end of paid parental leave with the availability of ECEC places. However, it is essential to avoid excessively long leave, as this can reinforce gender inequality and hinder women's career progression.

LONG TERM: Investing in early childhood education and care services should be a strategic goal because not only is it the first step in the education system, it is also a key prerequisite for women to return to the labour market and a key factor in deciding on parenthood.

Q&A
