

Towards Gender Equity in Early Childhood Education: Investigating Low Male Participation in Scaling Inclusive Home-Based Early Learning Initiative (SIHELI) Centers in Nimba County, Liberia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1308000114>

Received: 22 August 2026; Accepted: 27 August 2026; Published: 07 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Although a global body of research documents male underrepresentation in early childhood education (ECE), no empirical study had previously examined this problem within Liberia, leaving policymakers and program implementers without local evidence on why men remain scarce in the country's ECE workforce or on which interventions would be most effective. This study addressed that gap by examining the persistent gender imbalance in early childhood education within Scaling Inclusive Home-based Early Learning Initiative (SIHELI) centers in Nimba County, Liberia, where women dominate both parent-teacher and professional teacher roles while men remain markedly underrepresented. Guided by a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the study drew descriptive survey data from 41 respondents (85.4% female, 14.6% male) across parent-teachers, professional ECE teachers, parents, and center management committee members at three SIHELI centers, complemented by semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions analyzed thematically. Descriptive frequency and percentage analysis showed that respondents overwhelmingly attributed male underrepresentation to deep socio-cultural conditioning: 97.6% agreed that men are raised to view childcare as unsuitable for their gender, and 92.7% agreed that childcare is regarded as primarily a woman's responsibility. Strong institutional and economic barriers were also evident, with 97.6% of respondents citing low salaries and 100% citing the low social status of ECE teaching as discouraging male participation. Respondents favored structural interventions, particularly financial incentives (85.4%) and policy reform (87.8%), over softer strategies such as community sensitization (24.4%), public recognition (17.1%), or mentorship (12.5%). Qualitative findings converged on inadequate compensation, set against men's culturally expected role as household providers, as the central barrier to male participation. By generating the first empirical, Liberia-specific evidence on this problem, the study contributes new knowledge in the form of a Provider-Constraint-Compensation Nexus: a locally grounded explanation in which men's culturally expected role as household providers, not overt cultural prohibition, is what converts low ECE pay and status into active disincentives against male participation, distinguishing the Liberian pattern from settings where stigma alone is the primary barrier. The study recommends targeted stipend reform, gender-responsive recruitment policy, and structural rather than purely awareness-based interventions to advance male participation and gender equity in Liberia's early childhood education workforce. The study is framed by liberal feminist theory, which holds that occupational gender segregation - whether it disadvantages women or, as in this case, men - reflects removable structural and socio-cultural barriers rather than a fixed division of labor, and is situated within global gender-equality frameworks, including CEDAW and the Sustainable Development Goals, that call for men's and women's equal participation across occupational domains, including caregiving and education.

Keywords: gender equity; early childhood education; male participation; home-based learning centers; SIHELI Liberia

INTRODUCTION

In Africa, parents play a central role in the upbringing and education of children, not only as caregivers but also as teachers who impart moral, social, and cultural values. This dual role enables children to acquire both physical and moral skills that prepare them to become resourceful individuals within their communities. Recognizing the

significance of this parental role, home-based early learning centers have been established in Liberia through the Scaling Inclusive Home-based Early Learning Initiative (SIHELI). These centers are designed to combine the teaching of curricular subjects - such as Mathematics, Writing, and Reading - with lessons in morality, cultural practices, and economic responsibilities.

In these centers, professional teachers, with at least a “C” Certificate as mandated by the Liberia Education Reform Act (2011), are responsible for curricular subjects. Parent-teachers, on the other hand, contribute their expertise in cultural instruction, including moral lessons, storytelling, songs, parables, and traditional practices (Duo & Gonquoi, 2025). This dual teaching model strengthens community ownership of education and ensures that children receive a holistic learning experience that integrates both formal academic knowledge and indigenous cultural values.

However, the teaching workforce in these home-based centers demonstrates a strong gender imbalance. Evidence shows that women dominate both parent-teacher and professional teacher roles, while men remain underrepresented. From the perspective of teacher participation, data gathered from selected learning centers in Nimba County indicates that more females are engaged in early childhood education compared to males. While female dominance ensures continuity of caregiving traditions, the near absence of male figures in early childhood settings raises concerns about gender inclusivity, representation, and equity. The central problem this study addresses is that, despite this visible imbalance, no empirical research has yet established why men remain scarce in Liberia’s home-based ECE workforce specifically, leaving SIHELI, Nimba University, and the Ministry of Education without a local evidence base for designing effective interventions.

Previous studies in Liberia highlight systemic challenges in early childhood education, such as long distance away from homes to school, inadequate access to facilities, and a shortage of trained personnel (Doe, 2020). To address these challenges, Duo and Gonquoi (2025) advocate for home-based learning centers that integrate both African and Western educational approaches. While this innovation has enhanced access and promoted cultural relevance, it has also exposed the persistent issue of gender imbalance in early childhood education participation.

This study is anchored in liberal feminist theory, which traces its roots to Enlightenment liberal thought and holds that men and women are entitled to equal rights, equal opportunity, and equal participation in public, economic, and occupational life once artificial legal, institutional, and social barriers to that participation are removed (Tong, 2009). Applied to occupational contexts, liberal feminist theory maintains that gender segregation in any profession - whether it favors men, as in engineering, or favors women, as in early childhood education (ECE) - is not a natural or biologically fixed outcome, but the product of removable social conditioning, discriminatory practice, and unequal access to opportunity and reward (Freedman, 2001). The theory therefore assumes that, absent such barriers, men and women would participate in a given occupation in broadly comparable proportions.

This study draws on liberal feminist theory as a normative lens for interpreting male underrepresentation in SIHELI centers. Discussions of gender and occupation often focus on removing barriers that exclude women from male-dominated fields; liberal feminist theory applies the same logic with equal force to fields such as ECE that have become female-dominated. Read this way, low male participation in early childhood education is not treated as a natural consequence of gendered aptitude or inclination, but as evidence of unremoved structural barriers - socio-cultural conditioning, low compensation, and low occupational status - whose removal should, in principle, allow male participation to rise toward parity with female participation (Cameron, 2006; Skelton, 2009). The theory therefore supports this study’s central premise: that equal participation of men and women in ECE is an appropriate and attainable policy goal, and that structural reform, rather than acceptance of the status quo, is the theoretically consistent response to the imbalance documented in this paper.

Problem Statement

Duo and Gonquoi (2025) highlight the emerging demand for professional teachers and adequate learning spaces in early childhood education (ECE), particularly where early childhood division (ECD) curriculum subjects are merged and parent-teachers are recruited to fill gaps created by the absence of professional teachers. However, data from five home-based early childhood learning centers in Nimba County - Zolowee, Sehyikimpa, Zuluyee,

Dingamon, and Nengbein - reveal a persistent gender imbalance in teacher distribution. Out of 20 parent-teachers, 17 are female and only 3 are male, while among 20 professional ECE teachers, 17 are female and 3 are male.

This disparity underscores two interrelated challenges: (1) the disproportionate reliance on women in both community-based (parent-teacher) and professional (ECE teacher) roles, and (2) the continued underrepresentation of men in early childhood education. While women's strong participation sustains the caregiving and cultural transmission functions of these centers, the near absence of male educators limits children's access to diverse role models, weakens inclusive community engagement, and perpetuates gendered divisions of labor within the educational sector.

Studies have consistently shown that the ECE workforce is globally dominated by females, often exceeding 90% representation (Cameron, 2006; Peeters, 2007; Skelton, 2009). Several factors have been identified as contributors to this imbalance. Socio-cultural beliefs that associate caregiving and nurturing with femininity discourage male participation in ECE (Sargent, 2001; Warin & Gannerud, 2014). Institutional factors such as recruitment policies, training access, and gender-targeted incentives also affect male inclusion in the field (Mills, Martino, & Lingard, 2004; Skelton, 2009). Furthermore, economic considerations - including low income and limited professional advancement - reduce the attractiveness of early childhood teaching to men (Simpson, 2005; Cameron, 2006; Hutchings, Carrington, & Skelton, 2007). Motivation has also been identified as a determinant, as men who enter the field often do so for intrinsic reasons such as the desire to support child development rather than financial gain (Cameron, 2006; Simpson, 2005). Meanwhile, community attitudes toward male teachers play a vital role in either promoting or discouraging gender inclusivity in ECE (Jones, 2007).

Although these studies have provided valuable insights into the global and regional dimensions of gender disparity in early childhood education, none have been conducted within the Liberian context. Moreover, limited attention has been given to home-based learning centers that integrate both professional and parent-teachers in rural settings. The main problem this study addresses, therefore, is the absence of Liberia-specific evidence on why men remain underrepresented in this dual-teacher, home-based model, and on whether the socio-cultural, institutional, or economic explanations documented elsewhere also account for the pattern observed in Nimba County. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by examining gender imbalance in early childhood education within selected home-based learning centers in Nimba County, Liberia, focusing on the interplay between socio-cultural beliefs, institutional practices, and economic considerations affecting male participation.

If the underlying factors behind male underrepresentation in early childhood care are not identified and addressed, the existing gender disparity is likely to persist, with long-term implications for gender equity, children's socialization, and the inclusivity of Liberia's educational system. Therefore, examining the causes of male scarcity in early childhood education, particularly within home-based learning centers, is essential for developing strategies that promote gender balance, ensure diverse role modeling, and advance equity in the education of young children.

Beyond the academic literature, the problem of gender imbalance in caregiving and educational occupations is also recognized within international policy frameworks that call for the equal participation of men and women across all sectors of social and economic life. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) obligates states to eliminate stereotyped roles for men and women and to promote shared responsibility for the upbringing of children (United Nations, 1979). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action similarly calls for the removal of occupational segregation and the encouragement of men's involvement in caregiving roles as a condition for substantive gender equality (United Nations, 1995). At the global development level, Sustainable Development Goal 5 commits countries to ending all forms of discrimination and ensuring women's and men's full and effective participation in social and economic life (United Nations, 2015), while the International Labor Organization's Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention obliges member states, including Liberia, to pursue policies that eliminate occupational discrimination on the basis of sex (International Labor Organization, 1958). Regionally, the African Union's Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol) calls on states to promote shared parental responsibility and to eliminate gender stereotypes in education and employment (African Union, 2003). These frameworks collectively situate the gender imbalance documented in SIHELI centers not merely as a local

staffing pattern, but as an instance of a globally recognized policy problem, reinforcing the case for structural intervention advanced later in this study.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to examine the factors contributing to the underrepresentation of males in early childhood education within home-based learning centers in Nimba County, Liberia.

Research Objectives

The study sought to:

1. identify the socio-cultural factors that discourage male participation in early childhood education within home-based learning centers in Nimba County.
2. examine the policy-related factors affecting gender imbalance among parent-teachers and professional teachers in these centers.
3. propose strategies to encourage greater male involvement and promote gender equity in early childhood education.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What socio-cultural factors discourage men from participating in early childhood education within home-based learning centers in Nimba County?
2. How do policy-related factors contribute to gender imbalance among parent-teachers and professional ECE teachers?
3. What strategies can be implemented to promote male participation and achieve gender equity in early childhood education?

Method

This study adopted a mixed-method research approach using the convergent parallel design. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then merged during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The gender imbalance among professional and parent-teachers in early childhood education involves both measurable patterns (quantitative) and underlying social or cultural explanations (qualitative). Using both methods allowed the researchers to explore why such imbalances exist from the perspectives of professional and parent-teachers. Integrating numeric trends from questionnaire with participants' lived experiences from the focus-group discussions and interviews enabled the researchers to arrive at more valid, triangulated conclusions.

The study sample comprised three (one male and two females) professional teachers, three (one male and two females) parent-teachers, five (two male and three female) lettered center management committee (CMC) members, and five (three males and two females) lettered parents whose children were enrolled at each SIHELI home-based learning center. In essence, each of the three research focus centers contributed 16 participants, for a combined total of 48 (six males and 42 females) sampled participants; complete demographic returns were obtained for 41 (six males and 35 females) of these respondents. This purposive sampling was appropriate to ensure that data were collected from respondents with the knowledge to address gender imbalance among male and female teachers in the early childhood education environment. Participation was on the basis of participants' willingness to participate, rather than a formula. To increase everyone's chances of participation, the researcher informed all professional and parent teachers, along with the CMC members and parents, at a meeting about the conduct of the study and its purpose. Those who signed and returned the informed consent and assembled for

data collection participated in the study. The researchers guided participants in responding to the questionnaire, and the focus group discussion and interview followed.

Data were collected using three methods: questionnaire, focus group discussion, and interview. First, the 35 female participants and six male participants responded to the questionnaire items. Second, six male and three female respondents participated in the focus group discussions conducted across the three centers, because the male responses to the gender imbalance was key. Finally, interview data were collected from six male to gain deeper insights into their limited number of participants at the early childhood level.

A descriptive survey design was used to collect numerical data on the distribution of male and female teachers (parent-teachers and ECE teachers) and to measure participants' views on socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers to male participation. Structured questionnaires with closed-ended items on a Likert scale were used to collect the quantitative data.

Parent-teachers and ECE teachers from three of the five home-based learning centers in Nimba County (Zolowee, Zuluyee, and Dingamon) were the main study participants. A pilot was conducted at the two remaining centers (Sehyikimpa and Nengbein) to validate the instruments and establish internal consistency. The reliability test used Cronbach's Alpha for the non-dichotomous items and Kuder-Richardson 20 (KR-20), with a coefficient of .70 or higher considered acceptable before the survey proceeded to full administration; KR-20 was appropriate for assessing the internal consistency of questionnaire instruments with dichotomous items (Gonquoi, 2023). Stratified sampling was used to ensure that both male and female participants were represented. The qualitative instruments were validated by sharing the interview guide and focus-group discussion guide with experts, who removed problematic items and replaced with more appropriate ones. Following pilot data collection, the instruments were further restructured based on field experience, making the questionnaire, interview guide, and focus-group discussion guide appropriate for generating the intended data.

Descriptive statistics using frequency counts and percentages were used to describe the distribution of responses, including demographic data such as gender and role. This statistical approach helped identify patterns, such as the proportion of male and female respondents and the prevalence of each influencing factor, and makes results easy to interpret and visualize through tables.

Because each Likert item collapsed to a dichotomous Agree/Disagree distribution, with no respondent selecting the neutral option, responses were summarized descriptively for each item using frequency counts and percentages of agreement and disagreement. This descriptive approach allowed the researchers to identify which socio-cultural, institutional, and strategic factors respondents most strongly endorsed or rejected, providing a clear and interpretable picture of prevailing perceptions across the sample.

A phenomenological approach was used to analyze the qualitative data in order to understand the lived experiences, perceptions, and cultural reasoning behind male underrepresentation in early childhood education. Semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions with selected male and female parent-teachers, professional teachers, parents and CMC members were used to collect the qualitative data.

The study employed several qualitative variables to explore male participation in early childhood education (ECE). Cultural perceptions of gender roles captured community beliefs about the responsibilities of men and women in child-rearing, helping to explain how traditional norms often discourage men from pursuing careers in ECE. Institutional experiences focused on teachers' first-hand encounters with recruitment, training opportunities, and administrative support, revealing systemic barriers that may limit male involvement. Motivational factors examined the personal reasons that influence individuals to participate or not participate in ECE, offering insight into strategies that could attract more men to the field. Finally, parents' perceptions addressed local attitudes toward male teachers in early education settings, helping identify the level of social acceptance or resistance that shapes male engagement in ECE roles. Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret recurring themes.

Findings

This section presents, interprets, and discusses the data generated from the field using the questionnaire, interview guide, and focus-group discussions, and situates the findings within the wider literature on gender and the ECE workforce. The results begin with the demographic characteristics of respondents, followed by the descriptive quantitative results for each research question - each accompanied by frequencies and percentages - and then the qualitative findings that validated and enriched the quantitative patterns. It was observed that the interview and focus-group discussion responses converged on the same broad conclusions as the questionnaire data; the researchers therefore present the quantitative and qualitative evidence together as a single, combined set of findings.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic information focused on respondents' connection to the early learning environment, generating data on their roles in the centers and their length of experience. Table One presents the demographic characteristics of respondents.

Table One: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Statement	Response	f	%
Gender of Respondents	Male	6	14.6
	Female	35	85.4
I am currently involved in a home-based early learning center.	Yes	41	100.0
	No	0	0.0
I have been involved in childcare or early childhood education for more than five years.	Yes	28	68.3
	No	13	31.7
My role in the center is	Parent-teacher	6	14.6
	Professional ECE teacher	5	12.2
	Parent	15	36.6
	CMC Member	15	36.6

Source: Fieldwork (2026)

The sample was overwhelmingly female (35 of 41 respondents, 85.4%), with men accounting for only 14.6% of respondents - a composition that itself mirrors the gender imbalance the study investigates and is broadly consistent with global evidence that the ECE workforce is dominated by women, frequently exceeding 90% in some settings (Cameron, 2006; Peeters, 2007; Skelton, 2009). All 41 respondents (100%) were currently involved in a home-based early learning center, confirming that the sample was drawn appropriately from individuals with first-hand exposure to the phenomenon under study. Most respondents (68.3%, 28) had more than five years of experience in childcare or ECE, suggesting that the attitudes captured in the subsequent tables are grounded in sustained, rather than incidental, engagement with these centers. Respondents were fairly evenly split among the four roles sampled, with parents and CMC members each constituting 36.6% (15) of the sample, and parent-teachers (14.6%, 6) and professional ECE teachers (12.2%, 5) contributing the remainder - a distribution that reflects the study's deliberate inclusion of both direct providers and community stakeholders in early childhood education.

Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting Male Participation in Early Childhood Education

This aspect of the study addressed Research Question One: What socio-cultural factors discourage men from participating in early childhood education within home-based learning centers in Nimba County? Five-point Likert-scale responses (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) were collapsed for reporting: strongly agree and agree were combined into Agree (A), and disagree and strongly disagree were combined into Disagree (DA). No respondent selected the neutral option, so neutral responses are omitted from the table. Table Two presents the frequencies and percentages for each item.

Table Two: Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting Male Participation in Early Childhood Education

Statement	Response	f	%
In my community, childcare is considered mainly the responsibility of women.	Agree (A)	38	92.7
	Disagree (DA)	3	7.3
Men who engage in childcare are often ridiculed or discouraged by others.	Agree (A)	25	61.0
	Disagree (DA)	16	39.0
Cultural beliefs about masculinity discourage men from working with young children.	Agree (A)	30	73.2
	Disagree (DA)	11	26.8
Males are raised to believe that teaching or caring for young children is not a man's role.	Agree (A)	40	97.6
	Disagree (DA)	1	2.4
Elders and family members discourage men from participating in early childhood education.	Agree (A)	10	24.4
	Disagree (DA)	31	75.6
Men fear social stigma if they work in home-based learning centers.	Agree (A)	24	58.5
	Disagree (DA)	17	41.5
Traditional practices or initiation rites limit men's involvement in childcare activities.	Agree (A)	4	9.8
	Disagree (DA)	37	90.2

Source: Fieldwork (2026)

The descriptive results show that respondents' views on socio-cultural barriers were rarely evenly divided; most items produced a clear majority position rather than an uncertain split. The strongest and most consistent pattern concerns direct social conditioning: an overwhelming majority agreed that males are raised to believe that caring for young children is not a man's role, and a similarly large majority agreed that childcare is considered mainly a woman's responsibility in their community. These findings closely echo the socialization argument advanced by Sargent (2001) and Warin and Gannerud (2014), who describe caregiving as culturally coded as feminine work from early life, and align with Cameron's (2006) observation that men who cross into nursery work are often seen as stepping outside expected gender roles. A clear majority also agreed that cultural beliefs about masculinity discourage men from working with young children, reinforcing the argument of Mills, Martino, and Lingard (2004) that constructions of masculinity - rather than lack of interest or aptitude - are a central mechanism excluding men from caring professions. Notably, all three of these items concern barriers to entering the field, not the treatment of men once inside it. This distinguishes the SIHELI findings from Williams's (1992)

glass-escalator thesis, which describes men who do enter female-dominated caring professions in some higher-income settings as often advantaged - fast-tracked toward leadership and status - once employed. No comparable advantage narrative surfaces anywhere in this sample; respondents' concern is squarely with keeping men out of ECE, not with what happens to the few who enter, suggesting that in the SIHELI context the socio-cultural barrier operates almost entirely at the point of entry.

Two items drew a clear majority toward disagreement, which is itself an informative finding: only a small minority agreed that elders and family members actively discourage men from participating in ECE, or that traditional practices or initiation rites limit men's involvement in childcare. Read together with the strong endorsement of the two socialization items above, this suggests that the barrier operates less through explicit family or ritual gatekeeping and more through diffuse, internalized community norms about what "men do" and "women do" - a distinction consistent with Jones's (2007) argument that community attitudes toward male teachers, rather than formal prohibitions, are what most shape men's willingness to enter ECE. It also echoes Newman, Fogarty, Makoe, and Reavely's (2011) finding, from a study of men's absence from home-based HIV/AIDS caregiving in Lesotho, that gender essentialism functioned as a diffuse community assumption about whose work caregiving is, rather than as an actively policed prohibition - a pattern that appears to hold in the SIHELI centers as well.

Two items - ridicule of men who engage in childcare and fear of social stigma - showed a more moderate split, with a sizable minority disagreeing in each case, suggesting the sample was more genuinely divided on these two items than on the others. This is broadly consistent with Jones's (2007) and Hutchings, Carrington, and Skelton's (2007) observation that stigma toward male carers is real but uneven, varying with individual community context and the visibility of existing male role models, rather than being a uniformly experienced barrier.

Institutional and Policy-Related Factors that Contribute to Gender Imbalance

This aspect of the paper addressed Research Question Two: How do institutional and policy-related factors contribute to gender imbalance among parent-teachers and professional ECE teachers? Responses were scored and reported using the same A/DA convention as Table Two. Table Three presents the results.

Table Three: Institutional and Policy-Related Factors that Contribute to Gender Imbalance

Statement	Response	f	%
Men are encouraged to apply as teachers or parent-teachers in home-based centers.	Agree (A)	35	85.4
	Disagree (DA)	6	14.6
There are enough male role models in early childhood education in my community.	Agree (A)	2	4.9
	Disagree (DA)	39	95.1
Access to ECE training programs is equally available to men and women.	Agree (A)	39	95.1
	Disagree (DA)	2	4.9
Low salaries discourage men from working in early childhood education.	Agree (A)	40	97.6
	Disagree (DA)	1	2.4
Job insecurity in ECE discourages male participation.	Agree (A)	4	9.8
	Disagree (DA)	37	90.2

The social status of ECE teachers discourages men from joining the profession.	Agree (A)	41	100.0
	Disagree (DA)	0	0.0
Existing education policies adequately promote gender equity in ECE.	Agree (A)	39	95.1
	Disagree (DA)	2	4.9
Lack of more incentives discourages men from ECE work.	Agree (A)	40	97.6
	Disagree (DA)	1	2.4

Source: Fieldwork (2026)

Respondents in Table Three held strong, consistent institutional perceptions across nearly every item. The clearest and most policy-relevant pattern concerns compensation and status: near-unanimous majorities agreed that low salaries discourage men from ECE work, that a lack of incentives discourages men, and that the low social status of ECE teachers discourages men from joining the profession altogether. This near-unanimous result strongly corroborates the economic explanation advanced in the international literature, where low pay and limited professional advancement are repeatedly identified as central deterrents to male participation in caring professions (Simpson, 2005; Cameron, 2006; Hutchings, Carrington, & Skelton, 2007), and it closely echoes Newman, Fogarty, Makoe, and Reavely's (2011) finding that men's unwillingness to work without adequate financial incentive - tied to the male breadwinner norm - was a major barrier to their participation in home-based caregiving in Lesotho, suggesting this pay-and-provider dynamic recurs across Sub-Saharan African caregiving contexts rather than being specific to Liberia. By contrast, only a small minority agreed that job insecurity specifically discourages male participation, suggesting that it is the low level of pay and status, rather than the precariousness of the position itself, that respondents perceive as the operative economic deterrent.

A more complex pattern emerges around the items on encouragement, training access, and policy adequacy. A large majority agreed that men are encouraged to apply as teachers or parent-teachers, that training access is equal for men and women, and that existing education policies adequately promote gender equity in ECE. Taken at face value, these three items appear to sit in tension with the documented composition of the ECE workforce itself - where only 3 of 20 parent-teachers and 3 of 20 professional teachers are male - and with the demographic profile of this very sample, in which men made up a small minority of respondents. This apparent contradiction is itself a meaningful finding rather than a data error to be explained away: it suggests a gap between the formal, stated openness of recruitment and training policy and its practical, on-the-ground effect on male participation - a policy-practice gap that mirrors what Mills, Martino, and Lingard (2004) and Skelton (2009) describe as the persistent failure of apparently gender-neutral recruitment policies to translate into a more gender-balanced ECE workforce. It may also reflect a social-desirability tendency to affirm that opportunity formally exists, even where uptake remains low because of the socio-cultural and economic barriers documented above. Future administrations of this instrument would benefit from probing this item further - for example, by pairing it with a direct question on whether respondents can name specific recruitment efforts targeted at men - to disentangle perceived policy adequacy from actual policy effect.

The male-role-model item does not belong in this policy-practice-gap cluster. Here the pattern runs the other way: an overwhelming majority of respondents disagreed that there are enough male role models in early childhood education in their community. Rather than sitting in tension with the low observed participation of men, this finding is directly consistent with it - respondents accurately perceive a shortage of male role models because there is, in fact, a shortage of male teachers in these centers. Read alongside Jones's (2007) argument that visible male role models shape community willingness to accept men in caregiving roles, this scarcity may itself function as a self-reinforcing barrier: with few male teachers currently in post, the community has correspondingly little basis for normalizing men in ECE roles, which may in turn depress future male entry into the field.

Strategies to Promote Male Participation

This aspect of the study addressed Research Question Three: What strategies can be implemented to promote male participation and achieve gender equity in early childhood education? Table Four presents the results.

Table Four: Strategies to Promote Male Participation

Statement	Response	f	%
Community sensitization can increase men's participation in childcare and ECE.	Agree (A)	10	24.4
	Disagree (DA)	31	75.6
Financial incentives would motivate more men to work in home-based learning centers.	Agree (A)	35	85.4
	Disagree (DA)	6	14.6
Public recognition of male ECE teachers would encourage other men to join.	Agree (A)	7	17.1
	Disagree (DA)	34	82.9
Including cultural activities (storytelling, skills-based learning) would attract more men to ECE.	Agree (A)	15	36.6
	Disagree (DA)	26	63.4
Policy reforms targeting male inclusion would reduce gender imbalance in ECE.	Agree (A)	36	87.8
	Disagree (DA)	5	12.2
Mentorship programs involving experienced male teachers would encourage participation.	Agree (A)	5	12.5
	Disagree (DA)	35	87.5
Improving working conditions would make ECE more attractive to men.	Agree (A)	25	61.0
	Disagree (DA)	16	39.0

Source: Fieldwork (2026)

The strategy items reveal a clear preference ordering. Respondents most strongly endorsed structural, resource-based interventions, with large majorities agreeing that policy reforms targeting male inclusion would reduce gender imbalance and that financial incentives would motivate more men to work in home-based learning centers. These findings are consistent with the economic-barriers literature (Simpson, 2005; Cameron, 2006) and directly mirror the strong agreement reported in Table Three that low pay and lack of incentives are what currently discourage men from the field - giving the descriptive results internal coherence across research questions.

By contrast, respondents largely rejected softer, recognition - or sensitization-based strategies: only small minorities agreed that community sensitization, public recognition of male ECE teachers, or mentorship programs involving experienced male teachers would meaningfully encourage participation. This pattern suggests that respondents view symbolic or awareness-raising interventions as insufficient on their own to overcome the deeply internalized socio-cultural norms documented in Table Two, echoing Skelton's (2009) feminist critique that campaigns to recruit men into caring professions have had only limited success where they are not paired with structural change to pay, status, and working conditions. It also parallels Newman, Fogarty, Makoe, and Reavely's (2011) conclusion that dismantling occupational segregation in caregiving requires confronting the underlying economic and normative structure directly, rather than relying on awareness or recruitment messaging alone. Two items - cultural activities such as storytelling or skills-based learning, and improving working conditions - showed a more even split of opinion, indicating less consensus across the sample on these two intermediate strategies.

Participants' Responses to Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Icebreaker under the code ICE – normalizing Male Bordering Support, participants' introductory remarks framed men's contributions to children's welfare as materially defined rather than caregiving-defined -most commonly citing school fees or supplies rather than direct care. These contributions were described as occasional rather than routine. This finding primes the Provider-Constraint-Compensation Nexus (PCN) from the outset of the discussion, establishing provision, not caregiving, as the community's default frame for male involvement.

Gender Equity and Childcare Norms under the code GEQ – Differentiated-Roles Consensus, group discussion tended to converge on “different roles” rather than “equal roles” as the operating norm, with childcare assigned to women and provision assigned to men through group consensus rather than individual disagreement. This mirrors the equity-as-bounded-practice pattern found in the interviews and establishes the cultural baseline within which the PCN finding sits.

Cultural Barriers to Male Participation under the code PRV – Economic Reframing of Cultural Barriers, participants raised traditional division of labor as cultural barriers, but consistently revolved the discussion toward economic reasons as the more decisive factor discouraging male participation. This represents a clear point of convergence: groups self-selected the economic framing over the cultural one when asked to weigh the two, generating some of the clearest PCN-aligned language in the dataset. This pattern is consistent with Newman, Fogarty, Makoe, and Reavely’s (2011) finding, from Lesotho, that the male breadwinner norm and an unwillingness to work without adequate incentive - rather than cultural taboo on its own - was the dominant barrier to men’s caregiving participation, and with Simpson’s (2005) broader observation that men weighing entry into non-traditional occupations tend to foreground economic viability over cultural acceptability.

Community and Household Dynamics under the code REL – Household-Level Trust with Economic Undertone, household reactions to men taking on childcare roles were found to be moderately supportive. Where resistance remained, it was tied to the perception that men would be “wasting time” on low-paying work, rather than to distrust of men’s caregiving competence. This finding mirrors the interview data on community attitudes and reinforces that relational resistance is secondary to, and often mediated by, economic judgment. This is a notable departure from findings in some higher-income settings, where suspicion of men in caregiving roles has been linked more directly to gendered mistrust of men’s motives around children (Sargent, 2001); in this sample, resistance appears economically rather than protectively motivated.

Institutional and Economic Factors under the code POL – Low Income as Primary Named Obstacle, “low income” emerged across groups as the most frequently and most emphatically cited obstacle to male participation in ECE -ahead of training access and concerns about professional respect or status. This theme produced the strongest single data point for the PCN finding within the FGD instrument, as it is the theme most directly and explicitly worded around compensation, and it mirrors Hutchings, Carrington, and Skelton’s (2007) finding that recruitment shortfalls in caring professions are driven primarily by compensation rather than by training or credentialing barriers.

Strategies for Gender Equity under the code STR – Economic Support Prioritized Over Dialogue/Reform, participants acknowledged community dialogue and role modeling as useful strategies but positioned them as complementary to, rather than substitutes for, financial and stipend reform. Policy change, when discussed, was interpreted by participants primarily in terms of pay scale and stipend policy. This confirms compensation as the lead strategic recommendation across both community members and institutional actors.

Closing Question under the code CLO – Compensation Named as the “Biggest Difference”, when participants were asked to identify the single change that would make the biggest difference, they most often selected economic support -a stipend or pay increase -over cultural change or institutional reform alone. Notably, this selection was most pronounced among professional and parent teachers, literate male parents and CMC members. This closing item stands as the clearest single-code confirmation of the PCN finding as the dominant theme across the study, and the point at which the “professional and parent teachers, lettered male parent and CMC member” respondent pattern is most visible.

Participants’ Responses to the Interview

Understanding Gender Equity under the code ERP – Equity-as-Rhetoric vs. Practice, participants’ accounts revealed a gap between stated belief in equal roles and actual acceptance of men in nurturing or childcare roles. Respondents affirmed gender equity abstractly, endorsing the principle that men and women should share responsibilities, but in practice bounded this belief when it came to men’s involvement in direct childcare. This finding sets up the cultural half of the Provider-Constraint–Compensation Nexus (PCN): equity was not rejected

outright by participants, but was consistently subordinated to the provider expectation described under the PRV code.

Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting Male Participation under the code PRV – Breadwinner Norm & Stigma-Economics, findings showed that men’s traditional childcare roles remain narrow, with feeding and bathing rarely reported as male responsibilities. Disapproval of men taking on expanded childcare roles was attributed less to ridicule or shame in isolation, and more to the practical concern that time spent in low-paid ECE work diverts men from their provider duties. Beliefs about masculinity were present in participants’ accounts but were consistently subordinate to this economic framing, consistent with Newman, Fogarty, Makoe, and Reavely’s (2011) Lesotho findings that breadwinner-linked economic reasoning, rather than stigma alone, drove men’s absence from caregiving roles. This section produced the most direct feed into PCN, as it is where respondents most explicitly rooted cultural discouragement in men’s inability to provide, rather than in stigma alone.

Institutional and Policy-Related Factors under the code POL – Stipend Inadequacy as Recruitment Barrier, participants described the recruitment of men into ECE roles as nominally open but practically unattractive. Training and certification access emerged as secondary concerns; the core deterrent identified was that salary levels and job security were judged insufficient against men’s provider obligations. This section represents the institutional core of the PCN finding -the point at which “improved compensation” was named most directly and most frequently by participants as the corrective lever needed to increase male participation, lending qualitative support to Mills, Martino, and Lingard’s (2004) argument that formally open recruitment policy is insufficient without accompanying compensation reform.

Community Attitudes and Gender Relations under the code REL – Conditional Social Acceptance, findings indicated that women, mothers, and the wider community were largely supportive or neutral toward male ECE participation in principle. Where suspicion did surface, it was framed more as economic skepticism -participants questioning why a man would take on such a low-paying job -than as moral objection to men caring for children. This finding shows that the social environment does not primarily block male participation; rather, it reinforces that the binding constraint on participation is economic, not relational or reputational.

Motivation and Strategies under the code MOT – Conditional Willingness Pending Pay Reform, participants who currently work in ECE cited love of children and community service as motivators, but both non-participants and current participants conditioned sustained or expanded involvement on stipend increases. Financial incentives were consistently ranked above community sensitization or pedagogical reforms as the preferred strategy for increasing male participation. This section serves as the terminal convergence point of the Interview Guide on PCN: when asked what would drive change, participants’ strategy recommendations defaulted first to compensation reform, with cultural or pedagogical measures positioned as secondary.

Combined Continuous Narrative (Quantitative, FGD, and Interview)

Synchronized across all three data strands, the descriptive quantitative results, the focus-group discussions, and the individual interviews converge on a single explanatory mechanism that no one strand establishes on its own: a Provider-Constraint-Compensation Nexus (PCN), in which men’s culturally expected role as household provider is what converts inadequate pay and low occupational status into an active barrier to their participation in early childhood education, rather than cultural stigma or masculinity norms operating as an independent, freestanding barrier.

The quantitative results established the relative weight of the barriers under study: respondents endorsed the economic and status-based items - low salaries, insufficient incentives, and the low social status of ECE teaching - more consistently, and with less internal disagreement, than the direct socialization items, and they favored structural remedies such as financial incentives and policy reform far more strongly than softer, awareness-based strategies. This weighting indicated where the strongest lever for change was likely to be, but not why respondents ranked the barriers this way.

The focus-group discussions supplied the missing why at the level of community consensus. When groups were asked to weigh cultural explanations against economic ones, they consistently and collectively redirected the

conversation toward compensation, treating the traditional division of labor as a background condition rather than the decisive obstacle. Household-level resistance to men entering ECE, where it surfaced at all, was attributed to the perception that men would be forgoing better-paid work rather than to any distrust of men's caregiving capacity - a group-negotiated reframing that positions economic viability, not gendered suspicion, as the community's operative objection.

The individual interviews supplied the same reframing at the level of personal testimony rather than group consensus. Participants described men's traditional childcare roles as narrow not because caregiving itself was viewed as shameful, but because time spent in low-paid ECE work was seen as diverting men from their provider obligations; beliefs about masculinity surfaced in these accounts but were consistently subordinated to this economic reasoning. Asked directly what would change their own or other men's willingness to participate, respondents defaulted first to stipend and pay reform, with cultural or pedagogical measures offered only as a secondary consideration.

No single strand yields this picture on its own. The quantitative data alone would support treating socio-cultural conditioning and economic disincentive as two separate, additive barriers of comparable standing; the qualitative data alone would support treating the barrier as primarily cultural, since participants raised masculinity and gender roles before they raised pay. It is only by reading the three strands together - the quantitative weighting, the group-level reframing evident in the focus-group discussions, and the individually reasoned subordination of cultural belief to provider obligation evident in the interviews - that the barrier resolves into a single, sequenced mechanism: cultural expectation is the frame through which men first interpret ECE work, but compensation is the condition that determines whether that frame is acted on. This sequencing, rather than either barrier considered in isolation, is the study's central combined finding, and it is what the Provider-Constraint-Compensation Nexus is intended to capture.

Viewed through the lens of liberal feminist theory, these combined findings support the interpretation that male underrepresentation in SIHELI centers reflects removable structural conditions rather than a fixed or natural division of labor. The near-unanimous endorsement of economic and status-based barriers, set against the comparatively lower endorsement of overt prohibition or family objection, is consistent with the theory's claim that occupational segregation persists chiefly through structural and institutional disincentives - which are, in principle, amenable to policy correction - rather than through immutable cultural or biological constraints. This theoretical reading strengthens the study's rationale for recommending structural, policy-level interventions over awareness-only strategies: if the barriers are structural, as liberal feminist theory would predict and as the data corroborate, then structural remedies are the theoretically appropriate response.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine why men remain scarce in early childhood education within SIHELI home-based learning centers in Nimba County, Liberia, and to identify strategies for improving gender balance. The evidence points to two interlocking explanations. First, deep-seated socio-cultural conditioning - the belief that childcare is women's work and that caregiving is incompatible with masculinity - discourages men from entering the field, independent of any explicit family or ritual prohibition. Second, and even more strongly endorsed by respondents, structural and economic disincentives - low pay, low status, and insufficient incentives - make ECE teaching an unattractive occupational choice for men who are culturally expected to be primary household providers. The near-unanimous agreement on the economic barrier, corroborated by the dominant qualitative theme of inadequate compensation, indicates that this is the more immediately actionable lever for policy and program intervention, even though socio-cultural change will remain necessary for a durable shift in gender balance. The finding that respondents perceive institutional openness (equal training access, encouragement to apply, adequate policy) more favorably than the actual composition of the workforce would suggest also points to an implementation gap between stated policy intent and practical outcomes that merits closer institutional attention.

These findings affirm, consistent with liberal feminist theory and the global policy frameworks reviewed earlier, that the persistent gender imbalance in SIHELI centers is neither inevitable nor immutable: it is sustained by identifiable, and therefore addressable, socio-cultural and structural barriers. Achieving equal participation of

men and women in early childhood education in Nimba County is thus best understood not as an aspirational ideal but as an attainable policy objective, provided that the structural and economic barriers identified in this study are deliberately dismantled.

Beyond documenting the Liberian case, this study's principal contribution to knowledge is conceptual: it is the first study to establish empirically that male underrepresentation in Liberia's home-based ECE workforce follows a Provider-Constraint-Compensation Nexus, in which men's culturally expected role as household providers is the mechanism that converts low pay and low occupational status into an active barrier to participation, rather than overt cultural prohibition or stigma acting alone. This reframes the policy problem: interventions aimed only at changing attitudes toward men in caregiving are unlikely to succeed unless they also address the compensation that men weigh against their provider obligations. This nexus offers a transferable analytic frame for future research on male underrepresentation in caregiving occupations elsewhere in Liberia and in comparable Sub-Saharan African settings where similar provider norms operate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. SIHELI and Nimba University, in collaboration with the county education authorities and Ministry of Education, should review and increase the stipend or incentive structure for parent-teachers and professional ECE teachers, with explicit attention to the level of compensation needed to make the role viable for men balancing household provider responsibilities.
2. Recruitment and incentive policies should move beyond general gender-neutral language toward targeted measures - such as recruitment quotas, signing incentives, or scholarships for male candidates - to close the gap between the high perceived adequacy of current policy and the persistently low actual participation of men.
3. Structural interventions (pay and incentive reform) should be prioritized over, or at minimum paired with, softer awareness interventions; the data suggest that sensitization, public recognition, and mentorship programs alone are unlikely to be perceived as effective by the community without accompanying compensation and policy reform.
4. Where mentorship or visibility interventions are pursued, they should be piloted and evaluated locally rather than assumed to work, given that respondents in this sample expressed clear skepticism toward mentorship as a stand-alone strategy.

Ethical Considerations

This study observed standard ethical protocols for research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, permission was sought from all the participants, voluntary informed consent was obtained from every participant, who was informed of the study's purpose, their right to decline participation or withdraw at any point without penalty, and the intended use of the data. Given that several items probed sensitive attitudes toward masculinity, stigma, and family provider roles, particular care was taken to protect respondent confidentiality: individual responses were anonymized prior to analysis and are reported only in aggregate form. Because male respondents constituted a small subgroup of the sample (6), additional care was taken in reporting qualitative themes to avoid presenting quotations or details specific enough to make individual male respondents identifiable within their communities, given the elevated risk of deductive disclosure in small subsamples. Data collection instruments were reviewed by external experts prior to fieldwork to remove culturally insensitive or leading items, and all data were stored securely and used solely for the purposes of this study.

Limitations of the Study

The current findings do not generalize to the issue of gender imbalance in conventional schools in Nimba County, Liberia, as the data were purposely collected from centers operated under the SIHELI research project. While

some findings may be closely related to conditions experienced in early childhood education environments elsewhere in Liberia, the study focused specifically on five centers for the pilot and main data collection, which limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the SIHELI context.

The limited number of participants, and in particular the small number of male respondents (6, 14.6% of the sample), may have constrained the diversity of male perspectives captured. Although the female-majority responses reflect general conditions that may contribute to gender imbalance, a larger and more balanced male subsample would likely have yielded richer, more varied first-hand accounts of the barriers men face.

Finally, because this study relies on descriptive frequencies and percentages rather than inferential statistical testing, the reported patterns describe the distribution of views within this sample and should not be read as establishing statistically confirmed relationships or associations between variables; causal or comparative claims beyond the descriptive patterns reported here should be treated with appropriate caution.

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