

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND SOCIAL COHESION AMONG MANDINGO WOMEN IN NIMBA COUNTY, LIBERIA

BY

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Abstract

Fair access to education is widely presented as a foundation for women's inclusion and community trust, yet in post-conflict Liberia educational opportunity remains unevenly distributed. Mandingo women in Nimba County, a Muslim minority in a county marked by inter-group tension, have received little direct study. This article reports the first specific objective of a wider study of equity and social cohesion: to determine the interplay between educational equity in fostering social cohesion among Mandingo women, asking how educational equity fosters social cohesion among them. Guided by Feminist Theory and Social Cohesion Theory, the study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. A five-point Likert questionnaire was administered to a simple random sample of adult Mandingo women in Electoral Districts 2 to 5 (399 of 400 returned), and nine purposively selected participants were interviewed. Data were analysed descriptively in SPSS and thematically. Most respondents disagreed that educational opportunities are equally available (55.7%) or that every Mandingo woman has equal access to education (63.2%), yet 81.7% to 90.2% agreed that equal education reduces social barriers, builds bonds, improves relationships and eases cooperation. Interviewees linked unequal access to financial hardship, male influence over schooling and early marriage, and described education as allowing women to "stand and know each other." The findings reveal a gap between the value women attach to educational equity and the access they experience. Because the evidence is perceptual and descriptive, it indicates perceived links rather than causal effects. Community-based, culturally sensitive education for women and girls is recommended.

Keywords: Educational Equity, Social Cohesion, Mandingo Women, Gender Equity, Access to Education, Community Inclusion, Liberia.

Introduction

Education occupies a particular place among the dimensions of equity because it shapes the resources with which people enter every other sphere of social life. Fair access to schooling affects what women know, how confidently they communicate, which networks they can join and whether they are heard when communities make decisions. Educational equity, understood as fairness in access, participation and treatment so that all learners can realise their potential regardless of gender, ethnicity or income (Jurado de los Santos et al., 2020; OECD, 2012), is

therefore not only an educational goal but also a condition for inclusion. Social cohesion, in turn, refers to the strength of the relationships, trust and sense of belonging that hold members of a community together and allow them to act collectively (Chan et al., 2006; Fonseca et al., 2019). The proposition that the first supports the second is intuitive, but its strength and form depend heavily on context.

International policy and scholarship have increasingly linked the two. UNESCO (2014, 2017, 2020) has argued that inclusive and equitable education systems make societies more

resilient and help diverse groups recognise one another as members of a common community. The OECD (2012, 2018) has framed educational fairness as a means of widening social mobility and narrowing the divisions that unequal opportunity produces, while comparative work associates more equal societies with higher levels of trust and fewer social problems (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). For women specifically, education is commonly presented as a pathway to agency, participation and collective action rather than as a private benefit alone (Kabeer, 2005; Stromquist, 2002). Much of this evidence, however, is drawn from cross-national comparisons and from high-income or majority populations, and it says relatively little about how women in minority communities in post-conflict African settings experience the connection between educational fairness and the cohesion of their own communities.

Liberia illustrates why the connection deserves closer study. The country's educational policy environment continues to show gaps in access, quality and relevance, and girls and women in rural and poorer areas remain at a pronounced disadvantage (Yele & Specioza, 2024). The World Bank (2012) has shown more generally that gaps in women's endowments, including education, constrain their voice and agency in households and communities. In Liberia these disadvantages are layered onto a recent history of civil war in which ethnic identity, land and belonging became sources of division.

Nimba County, in the north of the country and bordering Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, is the setting of this study. The county is dominated by the Gio and Mano, while the Mandingo, most of whom are Muslim, form a minority whose relations with their neighbours were deeply strained during and after the war, particularly over land, property and claims to belonging (Interpeace, 2008). Within this minority, women occupy a doubly specific position: they share the community's minority status and also face gendered expectations about

marriage, family responsibilities and the authority of men over decisions concerning schooling and work. Whether, and how, fair access to education relates to the cohesion of Mandingo women's social relationships is therefore a question with practical consequences for peace building as well as for educational policy.

This article addresses that question using the evidence gathered for the first specific objective of a mixed-methods study of equity and social cohesion among Mandingo women in Nimba County (Toure, 2026). It examines how Mandingo women perceive the availability of educational opportunities and equal access to education, how they assess the contribution of equal education to social barriers, community bonds, relationships and cooperation, and how interview participants explain these connections. It distinguishes throughout between what women report about access, what they believe about the social value of educational equity, and what the design of the study can and cannot establish about the relationship between the two.

Statement of the Problem

Mandingo women in Nimba County live in a community whose social relationships have been shaped by marginalisation and conflict, and the cohesion of that community depends in part on whether its members experience fairness in the opportunities available to them. Education is one of the most consequential of those opportunities. Unequal access to schooling limits women's personal and professional development, constrains their participation in community affairs and leadership, and may sustain the social divisions that equity measures are intended to reduce. The source study identified inequality in access to education as one of the factors that influence women's capacity to promote social cohesion in the Mandingo community (Toure, 2026).

The existing literature does not resolve how educational equity and social cohesion are related for this population. Studies of educational equity

and cohesion are dominated by cross-national and high-income evidence (OECD, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), in which cohesion is measured at the level of societies rather than within particular communities. Research on Liberia has addressed gaps in the education system (Yele & Specioza, 2024) and, separately, women's empowerment, land rights, gender inequality and peace building, but these issues have largely been examined as distinct concerns rather than through the lens of equity as a factor in social cohesion. Mandingo women have also received limited attention as a distinct group whose religious, ethnic, gender and economic position may shape their experience of both education and community cohesion. Finally, the relevant research has tended to rely on either quantitative or qualitative methods, so that measured perceptions are seldom read alongside women's explanations of them (Toure, 2026).

What remains inadequately understood is whether Mandingo women in Nimba County regard educational opportunities as fairly distributed, how strongly they associate equal education with the social conditions that constitute cohesion, namely reduced social barriers, stronger bonds, better relationships and cooperation, and what mechanisms they identify in connecting the two. Without such evidence, educational interventions for this community risk being designed around general assumptions about the social benefits of schooling rather than around the barriers that women themselves identify. This article therefore examines the interplay between educational equity and social cohesion among Mandingo women, combining survey and interview evidence within a convergent parallel design.

Research Objective and Research Question

General Objective

The general objective of the source study was to undertake an in-depth examination of equity as a factor in promoting social cohesion among

women in the Mandingo community, Nimba County, Liberia (Toure, 2026).

Specific Objective

This article addresses the first specific objective of the study: "Determine the interplay between educational equity in fostering social cohesion among Mandingo women."

Research Question

The corresponding research question was: "How does educational equity foster social cohesion among Mandingo women in Nimba County, Liberia?"

The source study did not formulate a statistical hypothesis for this objective, and its quantitative analysis for the objective was descriptive. No hypothesis is therefore stated or tested in this article. The study proceeded instead from a stated research assumption: that equitable access to educational and other opportunities can contribute to the promotion and maintenance of social cohesion, and that women who experience fairness, inclusion and participation are more likely to develop cooperation, mutual trust and a shared sense of belonging (Toure, 2026).

Theoretical Review

The study was anchored on two complementary frameworks: Feminist Theory, which explains why educational opportunity is distributed unequally between women and men and among women, and Social Cohesion Theory, which explains why the distribution of opportunity matters for the bonds that hold a community together.

Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory developed from the struggle for women's legal and political equality and broadened, from the 1960s onward, into an interdisciplinary analysis of how gender inequality is produced and reproduced through social institutions, cultural norms and everyday practices

(hooks, 2014; Tong & Botts, 2018). Its central claim for present purposes is that unequal outcomes between women and men are not natural or accidental but arise from unequal power relations and from expectations about the roles that women should occupy. Applied to education, the theory directs attention to the structural and cultural processes that shape who goes to school, for how long and with what support: the priority that poor households may give to boys, the expectation that girls will marry early and assume family responsibilities, and the authority of men over women's decisions about schooling and work (Kabeer, 2005, 2015).

Intersectionality extends this analysis by recognising that gender does not operate alone. Class, ethnicity, religion and socioeconomic status combine to produce distinct forms of disadvantage that cannot be understood by examining any single category in isolation (Crenshaw, 2018). For Mandingo women in Nimba County, membership of an ethnic and religious minority in a county where that minority has been marginalised, together with gendered expectations within the community itself, suggests that the barriers to education they encounter may differ from those faced by women of the majority groups and by Mandingo men. Feminist Theory therefore frames educational equity as a question of fairness in access and treatment for women whose position is shaped by overlapping identities, and it treats education as a potential source of agency through which women can recognise and contest the constraints they share (Stromquist, 2002).

Social Cohesion Theory

Social Cohesion Theory originates in Durkheim's (1893/1984) analysis of the bonds that hold societies together. Durkheim distinguished mechanical solidarity, in which cohesion rests on shared beliefs, values and ways of life in relatively homogeneous communities, from organic solidarity, in which cohesion arises from the interdependence of individuals who perform

different and complementary roles. In both forms, cohesion is sustained by a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. Contemporary scholarship has refined the concept but continues to note its imprecision (Chan et al., 2006; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). Chan et al. (2006) define social cohesion as the state of affairs concerning the vertical and horizontal interactions among members of society, characterised by trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, while Jenson (2002) emphasises the extent to which people feel that they belong to and are part of their community. Fonseca et al. (2019) similarly characterise cohesion through the willingness of members to cooperate and pursue shared goals.

These dimensions correspond closely to the indicators of social cohesion in the source study's conceptual framework: fewer disagreements, participation and cooperation, a sense of belonging and community trust (Toure, 2026). Applied to educational equity, Social Cohesion Theory suggests two pathways. Under mechanical solidarity, equal access to education may strengthen common values and mutual recognition among women who share a community identity. Under organic solidarity, education may equip women to perform roles in trade, community organisation and conflict resolution on which others depend, so that interdependence becomes a source of cohesion. Conversely, unequal access may weaken cohesion by producing inequalities of status and voice that divide women from one another.

Integration of the Two Theories

The two theories complement each other. Feminist Theory explains the origins of educational inequality among Mandingo women, locating them in gendered power relations, cultural expectations and intersecting disadvantage. Social Cohesion Theory explains its consequences, showing why unequal access to a resource as socially significant as education may weaken

trust, belonging and cooperation, while fair access may strengthen them. Taken together, they suggest that educational equity is relevant to social cohesion not merely because education raises individual capabilities but because the fairness with which it is distributed shapes women's relationships with one another and their capacity to act collectively. This combined framework guides the interpretation of the findings without implying that the study's descriptive evidence can test a causal pathway.

Empirical Literature Review

The literature reviewed for the source study is organised here around four questions that bear directly on the research question: what educational equity means, whether educational equity is associated with social cohesion, through which mechanisms education may foster cohesion among women, and what is known about educational inequality in Liberia and among Mandingo women. Three distinctions are maintained throughout: education as an opportunity, educational equity as fairness in access to and participation in that opportunity, and social cohesion as the social condition under investigation.

Conceptualising Educational Equity

Educational equity is defined in the literature in two related ways. In a review and scientific mapping of research on the term, Jurado de los Santos et al. (2020) identify a normative strand that treats equity as access for every learner to quality education that develops their social, intellectual, personal and emotional potential, and a strand concerned with the obligation of education systems to accommodate the diversity of learners. Kyriakides et al. (2020) argue that equity and quality are inseparable, since fair access to poor-quality provision does not deliver equal opportunity. The OECD (2012) adds a distinction between fairness, which requires that personal and social circumstances such as gender,

ethnic origin or family background do not obstruct educational success, and inclusion, which requires that all learners reach a basic minimum. These definitions share a focus on access and treatment rather than on attainment alone, which is the sense in which educational equity is used in this article. They are drawn mainly from analyses of formal school systems in high-income countries, however, and say little about adult women whose schooling opportunities were shaped by conflict and household poverty.

Educational Equity and Social Cohesion

A substantial body of work associates educational equity with social cohesion at the level of societies. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) show that more equal societies tend to report higher levels of trust and fewer social problems, and the OECD (2012, 2018) argues that fair education systems reduce stratification and widen social mobility, so that more people share in the benefits of growth. Schleicher (2014) draws on comparative assessment data to argue that systems combining excellence and equity create environments in which learners from different backgrounds are included and valued. UNESCO (2014, 2017, 2020) frames inclusive education as a foundation for resilient and cohesive societies. Putnam (2000) and Kawachi and Berkman (2000) link the broader stock of social capital, including the trust and networks that education helps to build, with civic participation and collective well-being.

This evidence establishes a plausible link but has clear limits for the present study. Much of it is cross-national and correlational, relating aggregate measures of equality or educational fairness to aggregate measures of trust or social problems. Associations at that level do not show that fairer access to education strengthens relationships within a particular community, still less among women in a minority group. Much of the policy literature, moreover, is normative: it argues for the cohesive value of inclusive education rather than measuring it. The relationship is therefore better

treated as a hypothesis to be examined in context than as a settled finding.

Mechanisms Linking Education to Cohesion among Women

Several mechanisms have been proposed through which education may foster cohesion. Stromquist (2002) argues that education contributes to women's empowerment when it develops not only cognitive skills but also the psychological confidence and political awareness that allow women to recognise shared conditions and act on them collectively. Kabeer (2005) cautions that access to education does not automatically produce agency, and that its empowering effect depends on whether schooling enables women to question rather than reproduce prevailing gender relations. Sperling and Winthrop (2015) document the wider family and community benefits associated with girls' education, including the intergenerational transmission of schooling.

A second mechanism operates through contact and mutual recognition. Banks (2015) argues that inclusive and multicultural education prepares learners to live in diverse societies by reducing prejudice and encouraging respect for difference, and Gurin et al. (2002) found that experiences of diversity in higher education were associated with outcomes relevant to democratic participation in the United States. These studies focus on inter-group relations in formal institutions, whereas the cohesion examined in the present study is primarily among women within one community. Their relevance lies in the proposition that shared educational experience can create the familiarity and mutual understanding on which trust and cooperation depend.

A third, critical strand notes that equity in one sphere may not compensate for inequality in others. Kabeer (2015) and the World Bank (2012) show that women's capacity to convert education into voice depends on their economic resources, legal rights and the norms governing their mobility and time. This qualification is important

for the present study, because it suggests that perceptions of the social value of education may coexist with persistent obstacles to obtaining it.

Educational Inequality in Liberia and the Mandingo Context

Liberian evidence documents persistent gaps in educational access and quality. Yele and Specioza (2024), examining Liberia's educational policy environment, identify gaps in access, quality and relevance that weaken the capacity of education policy to deliver equitable outcomes. UNESCO (2020) reports that, across sub-Saharan Africa, exclusion from education is concentrated among the poor, girls and marginalised groups. Liberia's post-conflict setting adds a further dimension: where education and other resources are perceived to be unequally distributed between groups, such horizontal inequalities may reinforce grievances that undermine cohesion (Stewart, 2002). In Nimba County, the post-war period was marked by tension between the Mandingo and the Gio and Mano over land and belonging (Interpeace, 2008), indicating that questions of fairness between groups are socially sensitive.

What this literature does not provide is evidence on how Mandingo women themselves perceive the fairness of educational opportunity and its connection to cohesion within their community. The research reviewed for the source study either addresses Liberia's education system as a whole, examines women's empowerment and peacebuilding without focusing on education, or treats social cohesion at a level of aggregation that obscures the experience of minority women (Toure, 2026). The present study addresses this contextual and population gap by combining measured perceptions from a large sample of Mandingo women with interview accounts that explain how access to education relates to their relationships and cooperation.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected within the same period, analysed separately and then compared during interpretation to identify convergence, divergence and complementarity. The design suited the research question because questionnaire responses could establish how widely particular perceptions were held, while interviews could explain the mechanisms underlying them. This article forms part of a wider study that examined four specific objectives concerning educational equity, economic equity, the challenges of achieving equity and strategies for enhancing it; it reports the evidence collected for the first objective from the common data set and does not draw on a separate sample.

Study Location and Target Population

The study was conducted in Electoral Districts 2, 3, 4 and 5 of Nimba County, Liberia. District 2 contains Sanniquellie, the county capital. The Gio and Mano are the dominant ethnic groups in the county, and the Mandingo, most of whom practise Islam, are a minority. The target population comprised all Mandingo women aged 18 and above residing in the four districts. The source study reports an estimated 38,234 Mandingo in

the study area based on 2022 data from the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, which it used as the population base for sample-size calculation (Toure, 2026).

Sample and Sampling

The quantitative sample size was set at 400 using the Taro Yamane formula with a 5% margin of error. Simple random sampling was used for the questionnaire. Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 399 were returned and analysed, a return rate of 99.75%. For the qualitative strand, ten participants were targeted through purposive sampling, and nine were interviewed. The source study describes the broader sample as including politicians, imams, civil servants, teachers, traders, stay-at-home parents and local authorities, so that the interviews would capture different positions within the community (Toure, 2026).

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the questionnaire respondents. Two features are relevant to interpretation. First, the respondents' own educational attainment was concentrated at the primary (39.8%) and secondary (41.4%) levels, with 14.5% holding undergraduate or graduate qualifications; the sample therefore reflects the perceptions of women whose access to higher education has been limited. Second, the sample was concentrated in Districts 3 (47.9%) and 2 (35.1%), so the experiences of women in Districts 4 and 5 are less fully represented.

Table 1: Profile of Questionnaire Respondents (N = 399)

Characteristic and category	Frequency	Percent
Age (years)		
18–25	48	12.0
26–35	93	23.3
36–45	104	26.1
46–55	119	29.8
Above 55	35	8.8
Highest educational level completed		

Characteristic and category	Frequency	Percent
Primary	159	39.8
Secondary	165	41.4
Undergraduate	50	12.5
Graduate degree	8	2.0
Others	17	4.3
District of residence		
District 2	140	35.1
District 3	191	47.9
District 4	42	10.5
District 5	26	6.5
Employment status		
Self-employed	48	12.0
Partially employed	93	23.3
Fully employed	104	26.1
Unemployed	120	30.1
Others	34	8.5

Note. Research data (2026). Adapted from the demographic frequency tables in Chapter Four of the source thesis (Toure, 2026).

Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data were collected with a structured questionnaire containing closed-ended items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The section addressing the first objective contained six items. Two concerned the perceived distribution of educational opportunity: whether educational opportunities are equally available to all in the Mandingo community, and whether every Mandingo woman has equal access to education. Four concerned the perceived social consequences of equal education: whether equal access reduces social barriers, whether equal education helps build stronger community bonds, whether better education leads to better community relationships, and whether education makes it easier for women to work together. Two

further items located elsewhere in the instrument also addressed educational equity and cohesion

directly and are reported as supplementary evidence: whether a lack of equal educational opportunities is harmful to social cohesion (from the section on challenges), and whether equal access to education can promote togetherness in the community (from the section on strategies).

Qualitative data were collected with a semi-structured interview guide. Three of its nine questions addressed the first objective: whether all Mandingo women have the same chance to go to school; how chances for education help Mandingo women support and understand each other; and how the level of education changes how Mandingo women join community activities. Responses to questions on money and resources, and on social and cultural obstacles, are also used

where participants connected them explicitly to educational access.

Validity, Reliability and Piloting

Content validity was addressed by checking that the instrument items corresponded to the research objectives and questions. The questionnaire was pre-tested with ten randomly selected individuals who were excluded from the main study, and its wording and structure were refined afterwards. Reliability was assessed through a test-retest administration to 30 respondents in Mandingo communities in Paynesville City and Gardnersville Township, Montserrado County. For the educational equity subscale, the reported Cronbach's alpha values were .872 at test and .832 at retest, with an average of .852, which exceeds the conventional .70 threshold for internal consistency (Toure, 2026).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed with SPSS version 27, and the results for the first objective were presented as frequency distributions for each item. For this article, responses were also summarised as cumulative disagreement (strongly disagree and disagree), undecided responses and cumulative agreement (agree and strongly agree). Item means and standard deviations were derived from the complete frequency distributions reported in the source thesis; they are descriptive

summaries of each item and are not reported in the source output. No inferential test, correlation or composite scale score was reported for this objective in the source study, and none is computed here, because these would require respondent-level data. Interview data were transcribed, coded and categorised to identify themes, and the two strands were compared at the interpretation stage.

Ethical Considerations

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Centre for Social Justice and Ethics of The Catholic University of Eastern Africa before data collection. Participants received an informed consent letter explaining the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw, and the measures taken to protect privacy and confidentiality. Participants are identified in this article only by number, and the information they provided was used solely for academic purposes (Toure, 2026).

Study Findings

Perceived Distribution of Educational Opportunity

Table 2 reports the responses to the two items concerning the distribution of educational opportunity. Both items show a clear predominance of disagreement.

Table 2: Perceived Equality of Educational Opportunity and Access (N = 399)

Item	SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean	SD (item)
Educational opportunities are equally available to all in the Mandingo community	98 (24.6)	124 (31.1)	75 (18.8)	73 (18.3)	29 (7.3)	2.53	1.24
Every Mandingo woman has equal access to education	101 (25.3)	151 (37.8)	77 (19.3)	45 (11.3)	25 (6.3)	2.35	1.16

Note. Research data (2026). Frequencies with percentages in parentheses, adapted from the Objective One frequency tables in Chapter Four of the source thesis (Toure, 2026). SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree;

U = undecided; A = agree; SA = strongly agree. Item means and standard deviations (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) were derived by the author from the reported frequency distributions and are not part of the original SPSS output. The second item was worded as a question in the instrument ("Does every Mandingo woman have equal access to education?").

A majority of 55.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed that educational opportunities are equally available to all in the Mandingo community, while 25.6% agreed or strongly agreed and 18.8% were undecided. Disagreement was stronger when the item referred specifically to women: 63.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed that every Mandingo woman has equal access to education, 17.6% agreed or strongly agreed and 19.3% were undecided. The item means of 2.53 and 2.35 both fall below the scale midpoint of 3, and the larger standard deviations for these items than for the items reported in Table 3 indicate that views on access were more divided than views on the value of education.

The difference between the two items is substantively informative. The first concerns the community as a whole, whereas the second concerns women. Respondents were more likely

to reject equality of access when the question was framed in terms of women, which suggests that perceived educational inequality has a gendered dimension within the community and is not only a reflection of the general scarcity of educational opportunity. Roughly one in five respondents was undecided on each item, which may reflect uncertainty about the experience of other women or reluctance to judge the fairness of provision. These figures are perceptions of access, not measured enrolment or completion rates, and should be read accordingly.

Perceived Contribution of Educational Equity to Social Cohesion

Table 3 reports the responses to the four items concerning the social consequences of equal education. In contrast to Table 2, agreement was predominant on every item.

Table 3: Perceived Contribution of Equal Education to Dimensions of Social Cohesion (N = 399)

Item	SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean	SD (item)
Equal access to education is very important for reducing social barriers among Mandingo women	12 (3.0)	25 (6.3)	36 (9.0)	214 (53.6)	112 (28.1)	3.97	0.95
Equal education for Mandingo women helps build stronger bonds within their communities	6 (1.5)	5 (1.3)	30 (7.5)	194 (48.6)	164 (41.1)	4.27	0.78
Better education among Mandingo women will lead to better community relationships	6 (1.5)	2 (0.5)	31 (7.8)	206 (51.6)	154 (38.6)	4.25	0.75

Item	SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean	SD (item)
Education makes it easier for Mandingo women to work together in the community	10 (2.5)	7 (1.8)	27 (6.8)	167 (41.9)	188 (47.1)	4.29	0.87

Note. Research data (2026). Frequencies with percentages in parentheses, adapted from the Objective One frequency tables in Chapter Four of the source thesis (Toure, 2026). Abbreviations and derivation of means and standard deviations as in Table 2.

Agreement that equal access to education is very important for reducing social barriers among Mandingo women reached 81.7%, with 9.3% disagreeing and 9.0% undecided. Agreement was higher on the three items describing positive relational outcomes: 89.7% agreed that equal education helps build stronger bonds within communities (2.8% disagreed), 90.2% agreed that better education leads to better community relationships (2.0% disagreed), and 89.0% agreed that education makes it easier for Mandingo women to work together in the community (4.3% disagreed). The item on cooperation recorded the largest share of strong agreement (47.1%), indicating that the practical capacity to work together was the outcome respondents associated most firmly with education.

The four items map onto distinct dimensions of social cohesion in the study's conceptual framework. Reduced social barriers correspond to inclusion and fewer disagreements, stronger bonds to belonging, better community relationships to trust, and working together to participation and cooperation. The consistency of agreement across these dimensions, with item means between 3.97 and 4.29, indicates that respondents did not see education as relevant to only one aspect of community life but as associated with the relational fabric of the community more broadly.

Supplementary Evidence from Other Sections of the Instrument

Two items outside the Objective One section addressed the same relationship, one framed negatively and one framed as a strategy (Table 4).

Table 4: Supplementary Items on Educational Equity and Social Cohesion (N = 399)

Item	SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean	SD (item)
Lack of equal educational opportunities is not good for social cohesion among Mandingo women	31 (7.8)	19 (4.8)	28 (7.0)	202 (50.6)	119 (29.8)	3.90	1.12
Giving equal access to equal education can promote togetherness in the Mandingo community	19 (4.8)	14 (3.5)	36 (9.0)	216 (54.1)	114 (28.6)	3.98	0.97

Note. Research data (2026). Adapted from the Objective Three and Objective Four frequency tables in Chapter Four of the source thesis (Toure, 2026). Abbreviations and derivation of means and standard deviations as in Table 2.

Of the respondents, 80.4% agreed that a lack of equal educational opportunities is harmful to social cohesion, and 82.7% agreed that giving equal access to education can promote togetherness in the community. Disagreement was 12.6% and 8.3% respectively. The first item yielded the highest level of strong disagreement among the cohesion-related items (7.8%), possibly because its double-negative wording ("lack ... is not good") was harder to interpret. Even so, the pattern replicates that in Table 3: when items were worded differently and placed in other sections of the questionnaire, roughly four in five respondents still associated educational equity with cohesion. This consistency across wording and position strengthens confidence that the pattern in Table 3 is not an artefact of a single item.

Qualitative Findings

The interview accounts of the nine participants were analysed thematically. Three themes bear directly on the research question; the quotations below are reproduced as transcribed in the source thesis.

Theme 1: Unequal access shaped by financial hardship

Participants attributed unequal access to education primarily to material constraints. Participants 1 and 2 described how a lack of money for school costs, and even for travelling to school, complicated women's efforts to obtain education. Participant 1 summarised the effect as "When lack of the resources it impacts you." Participants also observed that women with family support or connections were better placed than others. This theme converges with the quantitative finding that most respondents rejected the view that every Mandingo woman has equal access to education, and it explains part of that perception: in participants' accounts, the inequality lay less in formal exclusion from schools than in the unequal capacity of households to support women's schooling.

Theme 2: Cultural norms and male influence over schooling decisions

Participants also described cultural and social constraints. Many reported that men exercised considerable influence over women's decisions about education and work, and that early marriage and the expectation of raising large families limited women's time, ambition and freedom to pursue schooling. Participant 1 framed improvement as dependent on a change in outlook: "Then we will improve till our mindset is somewhat distant to our culture." This theme adds a gendered dimension that the survey items could register only indirectly, consistent with the stronger disagreement on the item that referred specifically to women's access.

Theme 3: Education as a basis for mutual recognition and collective agency

Participants consistently described education as a means of bringing women together. Many indicated that schooling enabled Mandingo women to understand and appreciate one another and encouraged them to participate in community activities. Participant 4 stated, "I believe that education will allow the Mandingo women to stand and know each other." Participant 1 connected education with collective action: "I believe that, once we all stand up and fight what is happening to us, then we would find the need to push." These accounts describe two linked mechanisms: mutual recognition, in which shared education allows women to "know each other," and collective agency, in which women "stand up" together against shared constraints. The theme converges with the high levels of agreement in Table 3, particularly on bonds and cooperation, and explains why respondents associated education with cohesion: in their accounts, education changes not only what individual women can do but how women relate to one another.

The interviews also recorded a counterpoint. Participants observed that where resources and support were scarce, women sometimes competed

rather than cooperated, and that only a few obtained the opportunities they sought. Although participants raised this mainly in relation to money and resources, it indicates that unequal opportunity, including educational opportunity, can divide women as well as unite them.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Table 5 summarises the comparison of the two strands in line with the convergent parallel design.

Table 5: Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings for Objective One

Aspect	Quantitative evidence	Qualitative evidence and relationship
Distribution of educational opportunity	55.7% disagreed that opportunities are equally available; 63.2% disagreed that every woman has equal access	Convergent: participants attributed unequal access to financial hardship, unequal family support, male influence over decisions and early marriage
Gendered dimension of inequality	Disagreement higher for the item on women (63.2%) than for the community item (55.7%)	Complementary: interviews identified gender-specific mechanisms that the survey items did not measure directly
Social value of educational equity	81.7% to 90.2% agreed that equal education reduces barriers, builds bonds, improves relationships and eases cooperation; 80.4% and 82.7% agreement on supplementary items	Convergent: education described as allowing women to "stand and know each other" and to act together
Conditions under which cohesion weakens	Not measured directly for education	Complementary: scarcity of opportunity and support described as producing competition rather than cooperation

Note. Research data (2026). Compiled by the author from Chapter Four of the source thesis (Toure, 2026).

The two strands converge on the central pattern. Mandingo women regard educational equity as highly valuable for social cohesion but do not regard it as achieved. The quantitative strand establishes how widely these perceptions are held; the qualitative strand explains the obstacles to access and the mechanisms through which education is thought to strengthen relationships. Neither strand measures whether women with

greater access to education actually report stronger cohesion than women with less, so the evidence describes perceptions of the relationship rather than an observed association between two measured variables.

Discussion

The central finding of this study is a marked gap between the perceived value of educational equity

and its perceived realisation. Large majorities of Mandingo women associated equal education with reduced social barriers, stronger bonds, better relationships and greater cooperation, while majorities rejected the view that education is equally available to them. Read through the study's theoretical framework, this pattern suggests that educational equity is understood in the community as a condition for cohesion that has not yet been met.

Educational Inequality as a Gendered and Material Problem

The finding that most respondents rejected equality of educational access is consistent with Liberian evidence of persistent gaps in access, quality and relevance (Yele & Specioza, 2024) and with UNESCO's (2020) observation that exclusion from education in sub-Saharan Africa is concentrated among girls, the poor and marginalised groups. The stronger disagreement on the item referring to women, together with interview accounts of male influence over schooling decisions and early marriage, accords with the feminist argument that educational inequality is produced by gendered power relations and expectations about women's roles, not merely by the absence of schools (Kabeer, 2005, 2015). The interview emphasis on household finances indicates that these gendered constraints operate alongside material ones; in the intersectional terms used by Crenshaw (2018), poverty, gender and community norms combine rather than act separately. The respondents' own educational profile, in which more than four in five had not progressed beyond secondary education, is consistent with this interpretation, although the study did not examine whether perceptions of access differed by respondents' level of education.

The source study notes that most respondents perceived economic opportunities as more equally distributed among Mandingo women than educational opportunities (Toure, 2026). This

contrast reinforces the significance of the educational finding: the perception of inequality in education is not an expression of a generalised sense of injustice but appears specific to the educational domain. At the same time, the interview accounts show that economic hardship constrains educational access, so the two domains are connected even though women evaluate them differently.

How Educational Equity Relates to Social Cohesion

The high levels of agreement on the cohesion items are consistent with the literature associating educational equity with trust, inclusion and social cohesion (OECD, 2012, 2018; UNESCO, 2014, 2020; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) and with Putnam's (2000) account of education as a source of social capital. The study extends this literature in two respects. First, whereas most existing evidence is cross-national, the present findings show that the association is also perceived at the level of a single minority community, among women who are themselves affected by unequal access. Second, the interviews identify mechanisms that aggregate studies cannot observe. The description of education as allowing women to "stand and know each other" corresponds to Durkheim's (1893/1984) mechanical solidarity, in which cohesion rests on mutual recognition and shared consciousness, and to the emphasis on belonging in Jenson (2002) and Chan et al. (2006). The association between education and the capacity to work together, which drew the strongest agreement, corresponds to the cooperative dimension of cohesion emphasised by Fonseca et al. (2019) and to organic solidarity, in which cohesion grows from interdependent contributions.

The account of education as a basis for collective agency also supports Stromquist's (2002) argument that education empowers women when it develops the confidence and awareness to act collectively, not only individual skills.

Participants did not describe education primarily as a route to personal advancement but as a means by which women could "stand up" together against shared constraints. In this respect the findings suggest that, for Mandingo women, the cohesive value of education lies partly in its capacity to turn individual awareness into collective action. This interpretation should be held with caution: it is drawn from nine interviews, and the survey did not include items measuring collective action directly.

The Limits of the Evidence and Points of Divergence

The findings should not be read as showing that educational equity causes social cohesion. The survey measured beliefs about the relationship, and widespread agreement that education strengthens bonds may partly reflect a generally positive social valuation of education rather than women's direct experience of its effects. Kabeer (2005) cautions that education does not automatically produce agency, and the World Bank (2012) shows that women's capacity to convert education into voice depends on economic resources, rights and norms. The interview observation that scarcity can lead women to compete rather than cooperate is a reminder that the relationship between opportunity and cohesion is not uniformly positive: unequal access may divide women, and educational gains that accrue to a few may generate new differences in status.

This qualification also aligns the findings with the horizontal-inequality perspective. Stewart (2002) argues that inequalities perceived to fall along group lines can generate grievance and conflict. The present study measured perceptions within the Mandingo community rather than comparisons with other groups in Nimba County, so it cannot establish whether Mandingo women experience educational inequality as a matter of inter-group fairness. Given the county's history of tension over belonging (Interpeace, 2008), this is an

important question that the present evidence leaves open.

Taken together, the findings support an interpretation in which educational equity is related to social cohesion through mutual recognition and cooperation, under conditions in which material hardship and gendered norms limit access. They are consistent with the theoretical expectation that fairness in the distribution of a socially significant resource matters for the bonds among those who share in it, while indicating that this expectation is, in the view of Mandingo women themselves, largely unrealised.

Recommendations

The source study recommends that the Government of Liberia establish and fund community-based educational programmes directed particularly at Mandingo women and girls (Toure, 2026). The findings reported here support three features of such programmes. First, because participants identified the cost of schooling and travel as barriers, programmes should reduce the direct and indirect costs of participation. Second, because early marriage, family responsibilities and male influence over decisions were identified as constraints, programmes should offer flexible learning schedules that take account of cultural and religious norms, including adult literacy classes for women whose schooling was interrupted. Third, because the cohesive value of education was described in terms of mutual recognition and cooperation, programmes should be organised so that women learn together, for example through group-based learning and mentorship, rather than solely as individual provision.

The source study further recommends culturally sensitive awareness campaigns that engage men, elders and religious leaders in support of girls' and women's education (Toure, 2026). This recommendation is consistent with the finding that male influence and community norms shape women's access, and with the view that

interventions are more likely to be sustained when they work with, rather than against, the community's own institutions.

Future research should measure both access to education and indicators of social cohesion directly, so that the association between them can be tested statistically rather than inferred from perceptions; compare Mandingo women with women of other groups in Nimba County to examine the inter-group dimension of educational equity; examine whether perceptions differ by respondents' age, district and level of education; and give fuller attention to the experiences of women in Districts 4 and 5 and of younger and older women.

Contribution of the Study

The study contributes in three respects. Contextually, it provides evidence on educational equity and social cohesion for a population, Mandingo women in Nimba County, that the literature reviewed has not examined as a distinct group. Empirically, it documents a consistent gap between the perceived social value of educational equity and its perceived realisation, and identifies financial hardship, male influence and early marriage as the obstacles women associate with unequal access. Theoretically, it shows how Feminist Theory and Social Cohesion Theory can be combined to interpret the relationship: the former accounts for the origins of educational inequality in gendered and intersecting disadvantage, while the latter accounts for women's understanding of education as a basis for mutual recognition and cooperation.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify the findings. The quantitative evidence consists of descriptive frequency distributions of perceptions; no inferential analysis, correlation or composite scale was reported for this objective, so the study cannot establish a statistical association, still less a causal effect, between educational equity and

social cohesion. The item means and standard deviations reported here were derived from frequency tables and describe single items only. The questionnaire items on cohesion were worded positively, which may have encouraged agreement. The sample was concentrated in Districts 2 and 3 and in the middle age groups, which limits generalisation to all Mandingo women in the county. The qualitative strand comprised nine interviews, and the source thesis reports themes without indicating how many participants expressed each one. Finally, reliability testing was conducted with Mandingo women in Montserrado County rather than in Nimba County.

Conclusion

This article examined how educational equity fosters social cohesion among Mandingo women in Nimba County, Liberia, using questionnaire responses from 399 women and interviews with nine participants within a convergent parallel mixed-methods design.

The evidence indicates that Mandingo women regard educational equity as highly important for social cohesion but do not regard it as achieved in their community. Majorities rejected the view that educational opportunities are equally available (55.7%) and that every Mandingo woman has equal access to education (63.2%), while between 81.7% and 90.2% agreed that equal education reduces social barriers, builds stronger bonds, improves community relationships and helps women work together. Interview participants attributed unequal access to financial hardship, male influence over schooling decisions and early marriage, and described education as enabling women to know one another and act collectively. In answer to the research question, the findings suggest that, in the perception of Mandingo women, educational equity fosters social cohesion by enabling mutual recognition, cooperation and collective agency among women, and that this potential is constrained by the unequal access they

currently experience. The conclusion is descriptive and perceptual. It identifies how women understand the relationship and the barriers they face, not an experimentally or statistically established effect, and it provides a grounded basis for designing educational interventions that are both accessible to Mandingo women and organised to strengthen the bonds among them.

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