

#### 1A.4. A Successful Experience with Out of School Girls, Ishraq in Egypt

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**Background/Significance:** Girls in rural Upper Egypt are a disproportionately disadvantaged group. Twenty-six percent of 13 to 19 year old girls residing in rural Upper Egypt either received no schooling or dropped out after just one or two years. As girls reach adolescence, especially if they are not in school, community norms dictate that they should be closely watched until a husband can be found. At a median age of first marriage of 18 and total fertility rates of 3.9, these girls are marrying younger and having more children than their urban counterparts. Studies repeatedly confirm a strong link between girls' lack of schooling and early marriage, high fertility, and poor maternal and child health. With limited economic opportunities, girls remain socially isolated within their families, without a voice in their communities and overwhelmingly subject to harmful traditional practices like child marriage and female genital cutting.

**Intervention/Activity Tested:** The *Ishraq* ("Enlightenment") program, was initiated in 2001 to transform these girls' lives by providing them with safe meeting places, giving them a second chance for education and helping them acquire skills necessary to become active members of their communities. The program is housed in village youth centers that, although ostensibly open to all, had until the beginning of the program been exclusively male spaces. Program curriculum emphasizes literacy and life skills with special attention to reproductive health, livelihoods information, civic engagement, and sports. Classes are delivered by a group of women selected from within the communities, known locally as promoters, who also act as intermediaries between the girls and their families and gatekeepers.

**Methodology:** The program was evaluated through a longitudinal survey comparing end-of-program participants' knowledge with control respondents.

**Findings:** *Ishraq* has had a deep impact on the girls' lives. In terms of rights and empowerment, data shows that, through the program, girls' attitudes towards early marriage changed, with the percentage of girls preferring marriage before 18 dropping from 28% to as low as 5%. Even girls residing in program villages who did not partake in the *Ishraq* also showed a decline in preference. When asked who should be choosing their husband, many girls stated the decision should not be made exclusively by their families and that after marriage they favor smaller families. *Ishraq* was also infused with messages on gender equity which led participants to score highly on the gender role attitudes index.

*Ishraq* provides important information on health and opposes harmful traditional practices that put girls at risk. Girls are better informed about health issues such as nutrition, anemia and smoking. Of particular importance is the improvement in reproductive health knowledge. Participation is associated with enhanced awareness of puberty changes, knowledge of contraceptive methods, ability to identify danger signs that occur after giving birth and sexually transmitted diseases. Participation for more than a year in the program succeeded in reducing support for female genital cutting from 71% to 18%. Support also declined among non participants residing in project villages.

Results show that participating in *Ishraq* had a significant impact on improving academic skills. As expected, full time participants gained the most literacy skills. *Ishraq* also aimed at giving girls the opportunity to return to formal education; data indicates that as many as 68% of full time participants managed to enroll in formal schooling. Additionally, the program was designed to teach girls practical skills such as making cheese, sewing and needle work. Compared to girls in the control group, 50 to 70 percent of *Ishraq* girls reported learning new skills from the promoters.

The program also affected the lives of promoters. These young village women with some educational background expressed the desire to work with younger girls. The promoters are trained on the curriculum, teaching techniques, outreach, advocacy, communication and networking, all of which help them address the parents, gatekeepers and the community at large. Through *Ishraq*, promoters gain experience, take on responsibility and become active, more visible members of their communities. Since their involvement in the program, some have established women's associations, joined political groups and accepted local leadership positions. In settings where political involvement is perceived as remote and inaccessible to girls and women, such civic development activities represent training ground for effective citizenship. Thus, *Ishraq* created a group of young leaders that can act as a role model for others.

**Lessons Learned:** *Ishraq* has made a major contribution to demonstrating that the expanded participation of young girls in society is possible and, indeed, urgently needed to break cycles of poverty and isolation. This experience suggests that creating safe spaces for interaction, securing community approval, and equipping promoters with necessary skills and knowledge are necessary and effective strategies to improve the life chances for rural Egyptian girls. Through *Ishraq*, girls are more informed, more empowered and more included in their communities.