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The Ishraq Program for out-of-school girls: From pilot to scale-up

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FINAL REPORT

THE ISHRAQ PROGRAM FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL GIRLS: FROM PILOT TO SCALE-UP



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The Population Council confronts critical health and development issues—from stopping the spread of HIV to improving reproductive health and ensuring that young people lead full and productive lives. Through biomedical, social science, and public health research in 50 countries, we work with our partners to deliver solutions that lead to more effective policies, programs, and technologies that improve lives around the world. Established in 1952 and headquartered in New York, the Council is a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization governed by an international board of trustees.

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FOREWORD

The Population Council has been drawing attention to both the vulnerability and the potential of adolescent girls for more than a decade. The Ishraq program in Upper Egypt is one of the first examples of a girl-centered program designed around rigorous evidence regarding the lives of poor out-of-school girls. The program identifies needs and then fills those needs by building the social, health, and economic assets girls require to thrive and become successful adults. From its inception, the program's design recognized the importance of families, community members, and local government in encouraging and sustaining change.

Program evaluation results indicate that Ishraq achieved many of its goals. Literacy levels improved substantially and many participants were successfully mainstreamed into formal schooling. Indicators of girls' mobility, the strength of their social networks, and the acquisition of empowering knowledge and life skills were better, compared with nonparticipants. Moreover, Ishraq's influence on improving adolescent girls' lives extends far beyond Egypt's borders. Lessons gained as the program developed have informed and shaped the Council's global body of work with adolescent girls. Current girl-centered programs in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Zambia, and other countries have all benefited from the pioneering work conducted under Ishraq.

The Council is extremely grateful to the Government of the Netherlands for its long-term support of Ishraq. We acknowledge the critical contributions of our partners—Caritas, Teaming for Development, the Egyptian Food Bank—and the collaboration of the Ministries of Youth and Education, the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, and the Adult Education Agency. The staff and promoters who carried out the day-to-day work of Ishraq were critical to its success. Above all, we thank the Ishraq girls for their enthusiasm, courage, and determination to transform their lives.

ANN K. BLANC
VICE PRESIDENT AND PROGRAM DIRECTOR
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Ishraq program has gone through several phases: pilot, expansion, and scaling up. Several partners contributed the successful implementation of each phase. The scaling-up phase (the focus of this report) was made possible through the sincere and dedicated efforts of several nongovernmental organizations—Caritas, Teaming for Development, the Population Council, and Egyptian Food Bank. Generous funds from the Kingdom of the Netherlands and continued support from Gielan El-Messiri, Senior Policy Officer, were instrumental to the program.

Special thanks go to our government partners in Egypt; namely, the Ministry of Youth, the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, and the Adult Education Agency for their commitment to supporting out of school girls and for their willingness to sustain and institutionalize the program.

We would like to thank staff at our partner NGOs at the three governorates (FEDA and ROAA in Qena, HADEA and WAHI in Souhag, FED and El-Shabat

El-Moslemat in Fayoum) for their hard work and diligence in implementing various components of the program, often under circumstances that were challenging. Efforts of governorate and village committees in overcoming obstacles and in supporting Ishraq girls and their families are deeply appreciated.

This program would not have been implemented had it not been for the energy and enthusiasm of Ishraq girls who had to overcome many challenges to join the program. We are also grateful to their families and communities for supporting them to continue with the program.

Finally, we wish to thank our Population Council colleagues in Cairo and in New York for their constructive feedback and encouragement throughout the program.

The opinions expressed herein are ours and do not necessarily reflect those of the Population Council or its partners.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite national gains in school enrolment, health, and economic development, adolescent girls continue to face critical gender gaps in schooling, health, and livelihood prospects. While Egypt has made significant gains in school enrolment over the past decade,¹ girls, particularly in rural Upper Egypt, continue to be most at risk for either never enrolling or dropping out after one or two years. Studies have shown that girls who have never enrolled or who have dropped out of school are at higher risk for early marriage, early childbearing, poor health outcomes, and inter-generational poverty. Consequently, adolescence represents a critical transition point for out-of-school girls, who have often been neglected by development programs.

In response to this unmet need, Ishraq (Sunrise), a multi-dimensional program for 12-to-15-year-old out-of-school girls, was launched in 2001 by the Population Council in collaboration with CEDPA, Save the Children, Caritas, and local non-governmental organizations. The program combined traditional tested program elements (literacy, life skills, nutrition) with more innovative ones (sports, financial education). Classes were held in youth centers, traditionally male-only spaces. Program staff focused on building a multi-layered platform to support and institutionalize the program by educating and mobilizing communities around issues of importance to adolescent girls, forging partnerships between international NGOs, government institutions, and local NGOs, and building capacities of local facilitators and partners to implement the program. Critical to the process was the development of mechanisms and structures to institution-

alize Ishraq at the national and local levels. The project formed committees at village, governorate, and national levels to provide ongoing support to the program. For national scale-up, the project coordinated efforts with the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood and partnered with the Ministry of Youth (MoY) in building the capacity of cadres from the Ministry, NGOs, and youth centers to replicate Ishraq using local resources, advocacy, and networking. Post-training, these teams have replicated and provided technical assistance to 50 new Ishraq classes, four of which were pilots in non-Ishraq villages.

Over the past decade, Ishraq has promoted significant changes at the individual, community, and institutional level. The program has directly reached 3,321 girls and 1,775 boys in 54 villages, as well as over 5,000 girls' parents, boys, and community leaders across five of the most disadvantaged governorates in Upper Egypt. Rigorous evaluation of the program has shown that the program had a remarkable positive effect on participants and communities. For girls, program participation has improved literacy, developed life skills, increased self-confidence, led to greater mobility and community participation, changed attitudes and behaviors, and built solidarity and social support among girls who have traditionally been socially isolated. Eighty-one percent of participants who took the national literacy exam passed, with more than half of those girls joining formal schooling. At the community level, the Ishraq team has worked extensively through community mobilization and home visits to change parents' and others' traditional (or restrictive)

1 Primary school enrolment, net percent of school aged-children 1991/2009: male 97%; female 93%. Secondary school enrolment, net percent of school-aged children 1999/2010: male 73%; female 69%. Source: UNFPA (2011).

gender norms. It has created a 'safe space' in a traditionally male dominated venue, where adolescent out-of-school girls can learn, play, and socialize, and it has increased girls' visibility and status. Reflecting the positive achievements of Ishraq, demand for the program at the community level has remained high with many mothers and community leaders asking that the program continue and that the upper age limit be increased to include older girls, even those who are married. At the institutional level, the program has increased buy-in from governorate and national-level MoY officials.

While Ishraq has demonstrated significant achievements in the last decade, the experience of implementing and expanding the program has also highlighted the continuing challenges of changing deep-rooted attitudes and behaviors, maintaining a permanent girls' safe space in youth centers, mainstreaming graduates, and replicating and institutionalizing Ishraq. To ensure that girls can successfully enter and succeed in formal school, procedures for integrating Ishraq graduates need to be standardized and simplified at the governorate level. Continued support to Ishraq graduates, particularly during the first year of transition to formal schooling, is also critical. Program staff need to continue to work with Ministry of Youth and Ministry of Education (MOE) officials, school administrators, and parents to support these girls. Broader dissemination and advocacy efforts are necessary to raise policymakers' awareness of the challenges of implementing programs for out-of-school girls and to solicit their support in addressing those challenges.

Programs, governments, and communities need to make long-term investments in order to achieve significant change at the village level. Coupled with efforts to improve the technical capacity to implement Ishraq, NGO and CDA staff also need to be trained in advocacy, networking, and fundraising to ensure that the program can be scaled-up by leveraging local and national resources. Major corporations' support to Ishraq through their corporate social responsibility activities may be one promising source.

Since Ishraq's launch, the program has continued to evolve, with each phase building upon the lessons of the previous one and capitalizing on prior investments in social and human capital. As early participants have matured into young women, Ishraq has helped them make the transition into school, build community participation skills and knowledge of legal rights, and address their economic needs. Ten years later, Ishraq remains a unique program which addresses the unmet needs of out-of-school adolescent girls during this transitional period and as they become young women. In addition to continuing to expand Ishraq, for which community demand remains high, a new generation of girls' programs which builds on Ishraq needs to be developed to support graduates in exercising their rights and becoming active members of the community. The experience of Ishraq since 2001 has shown the need to adopt a life-cycle approach to effectively address the needs of out-of-school adolescent girls, including married adolescent girls.

THE ISHRAQ (SUNRISE) PROGRAM

BACKGROUND

Egypt is currently experiencing a youth bulge with the largest cohort of adolescents in its history. Close to 20 percent of Egypt's 85 million citizens are between ages 10 and 19, and almost one in three are between ages 10 and 24 (Roudi-Fahimi, El Feki, and Tsai 2011). Ensuring that this large population of young people can successfully make the transition to adulthood is a major concern for government and society.

Extensive research by the Population Council in Egypt (Population Council 1997 and 2010) and internationally has shown that adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable. Despite national gains in school enrolment, health, and economic development, adolescent girls face critical gender gaps in schooling, health, and livelihood prospects. "In a 2010 index by the World Economic Forum, the country ranked 125 out of 130 countries in increasing magnitude of gender-based disparities measured in four key areas—educational attainment, economic participation and opportunity, health and survival, and political empowerment" (Roudi-Fahimi, El Feki, and Tsai 2011). While Egypt has made significant gains in school enrolment over the past decade,¹ girls continue to be most at risk for either never enrolling or dropping out after one or two years. Moreover, as a consequence of restrictive socio-cultural norms, girls, particularly out-of-school girls, are more likely to have limited mobility leading to social isolation, a lack of peer networks, and fewer

opportunities to fully participate in public spaces and play a meaningful role in society. These problems are particularly widespread in Upper Egypt, which contains the five lowest-ranked governorates (Fayoum, Menya, Assiut, Qena, and Souhag), according to the Human Development Index (UNDP and INPE 2010). Out-of-school girls in Upper Egypt represent the most underprivileged, disadvantaged, and often overlooked group (UNDP and INPE 2010).

The Population Council's 2009 Survey of Young People in Egypt indicated that more than three times as many girls (11%) as boys (3%) aged 10 to 29 had never attended school; the vast majority of these girls are in rural Upper Egypt, where the ratio of non-school attendance increases to 5 to 1 (22.1%:4%) (Population Council 2010). Similarly, the Egypt Labor Market Survey in 2006 showed that 26 percent of girls aged 13 to 19 in rural Upper Egypt



¹ Primary school enrolment, net percent of school aged-children 1991/2009: male 97%; female 93%. Secondary school enrolment, net percent of school-aged children 1999/2010: male 73%; female 69%. Source: UNFPA (2011).

had either never attended or dropped out of school after one or two years (Brady et al. 2007). Studies have shown that girls who have never enrolled or who have dropped out of school are at higher risk for early marriage, early childbearing, poor health outcomes, and inter-generational poverty. Thus adolescence represents a critical transition point for out-of-school girls.

Traditionally many development programs have been designed for children (e.g., nutrition, health) or women (e.g., reproductive health). Programs that work with adolescent girls generally do so through formal schools; few have focused on the specific needs and vulnerabilities of out-of-school adolescent girls.

THE ISHRAQ PROGRAM

In response to this unmet need, the Population Council in partnership with Caritas, the Center for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) and Save the Children designed a multi-dimensional, second-chance program for 12-to-15-year-old out-of-school girls.² The Ishraq (Sunrise) program, as it is called in Arabic, is designed to address the specific needs of adolescent girls in a holistic manner. The program seeks to transform girls' lives by working with girls, communities, and government. In working directly with the girls, it aims to foster their self-awareness and build their self-confidence. It establishes girl-friendly "safe spaces" where they can gather, make friends, and learn; works to improve girls' functional literacy, cognitive skills, reproductive health-related knowledge and attitudes, and awareness of their rights; encourages continued schooling; and lays a foundation for citizenship. Through its work at the community level, the program seeks to change gender norms and community perceptions about girls' roles in society, bringing them into the public sphere and raising awareness of issues that affect them. In its collaboration with government, Ishraq works to increase

local and national policymakers' support for girl-friendly measures and policies. Program staff focus on building a multi-layered platform to support and institutionalize Ishraq by educating and mobilizing communities, forging partnerships between international NGOs, government institutions, and local NGOs, and building capacities of local facilitators and partners to implement the program.

The Ishraq program has been in existence for over a decade. At the time of its launch in 2001, the program was unique and filled a critical gap. More than ten years later Ishraq continues to be a unique program that addresses the unmet needs of out-of-school adolescent girls during this transitional period and as they become young women. This document tells the story of Ishraq's evolution from pilot to scale-up, why the program was conceived, how it has evolved, and the lessons learned along the way.

The Pilot Phase (2001–2003)

Ishraq was launched in 2001 in four villages in Menya Governorate, one of the most disadvantaged governorates in Egypt. Menya is ranked second to last among Egypt's 27 governorates on the Human Development Index.³ The program originally planned to reach 200 girls in Menya, but in response to high demand it ultimately accepted 278 girls.

Program content

Ishraq combined traditional tested program elements with more innovative ones. As initially developed, Ishraq had three major components for girls: literacy, life skills, and sports. Leveraging the different partners' expertise and curricula, the program used Caritas's "Learn to Be Free" literacy curriculum, which relies on active discussion between the promoters (mentors) and girls and includes Arabic grammar, vocabulary, and composition, and basic mathematics (numbers, counting, times tables,

2 During the scale-up phase the younger age limit was lowered to eleven to ensure that the program would have a sufficient number of girls per class. Girls who were eleven years old at the start of the program were allowed to enter because they would turn twelve during the program.

3 The five lowest-ranked governorates are Fayoum, Menya, Assiut, Qena, and Souhag (UNDP and INPE 2010).

addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, etc.). In addition, it included CEDPA's New Horizons life skills curricula, which discuss communication, team building, volunteering, negotiation, decisionmaking, critical thinking, reproductive health, health, hygiene, nutrition, female genital cutting, and the environment. The sports component was an innovation in a context where girls did not traditionally play sports. Girls started by learning the basic elements of physical fitness through traditional games that they were familiar with and then moving on to individual (table tennis) and team (volleyball) sports. This component focused not only on physical fitness, but also on mental well-being, social interaction, team work, team spirit, cooperation, and self-confidence. A medical check-up conducted at the beginning of the sports component was used to raise girls' awareness of their health status and familiarize them with public health services and their right to use them.

Another innovative feature of the program was to hold Ishraq classes in youth centers. While youth centers are intended for both boys and girls, they have become boys-only spaces. Wanting to reclaim part of the space for girls as a safe space and seeing it as the most appropriate location for the sports component, project teams decided to hold classes in the morning when boys would be at school in order to reassure parents that the youth center would be a safe space for girls to gather.

Who could believe the day would come when we would be able to enter the youth center? We never dared come close because it was for men only. Now we are equal; we have the right to go there. ”

—ISHRAQ PROMOTER

Village selection

To be selected, villages had to have a youth center that could accommodate two classrooms; a mini-

mum of 70 eligible out-of-school girls between the ages of 12 and 15; and buy-in from community leaders including a community contract or verbal commitment between the youth center and the local NGOs.

Forging partnerships

Recognizing the importance of collaboration with government for success and sustainability, the four partner INGOs worked closely with the Egyptian Ministry of Youth (MoY), the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM), and the former Ministry of Family and Population (MOFP).

The project also worked with local entities at the governorate and village levels, including youth centers, implementing NGOs, and the directorates of Youth and Sports. Local NGOs were responsible for implementing, coordinating, and managing Ishraq program activities at the governorate, district, and village levels, as well as participating in Ishraq-related advocacy and policy work at the governorate and village levels. Youth centers were responsible for providing a “safe space” for participating girls, conducting community activities, helping issue birth certificates and identification cards for girls who did not have them, and working with the education directorates to facilitate girls' entry into formal schools once they passed the General Authority for Literacy and Adult Education (GALAE) government literacy exam.

Recruiting promoters

Classes were facilitated by female secondary school graduates and sometimes university graduates, known as promoters, selected from the communities. Promoters served as teachers, role models, and girl advocates. They were involved from project launch in the recruitment process and served as the critical link between girls, parents, and the program. Each village had four female promoters (two for literacy classes and two for life skills, sports, and financial education classes). Promoters received training to equip them with the necessary leadership skills to positively influence community norms. They also met regularly as a team to discuss challenges and lessons learned.

Mobilizing communities

Recognizing that adolescent girls are not the main decisionmakers in their own lives, the project also worked to educate and mobilize communities around issues of importance to adolescent girls. Project staff organized orientation meetings and community dialogue activities with parents and gatekeepers (e.g., parents, brothers, and community leaders). Village committees were also formed and members, along with promoters, conducted home visits to check in on girls and address concerns of parents.

Recruiting girls

At project launch the project team conducted a community mapping and a household listing of all out-of-school girls in participating villages. Project staff conducted orientation meetings at the youth center to introduce the program. Eligible girls were recruited on a first-come basis. An orientation meeting for girls' parents was held before the start of the program, and two groups of 30 girls each were formed in each village.

The age range for program participation was determined by several factors. Project teams wanted to intervene in early adolescence at a stage when girls could still (re)integrate into formal schooling and avoid early marriage. Upon completing the program, participants sit for the General Authority for Literacy and Adult Education exam, and girls who pass can enter the formal schooling system. The upper age limit, 15, was set so that girls would have enough time to complete the program, sit for the GALAE exam, and enroll in school before the cut-off age of 18. The lower limit, 12, was set so as not to conflict with other national literacy programs for rural girls ages 6 to 11.

Program structure and implementation

Program duration was initially 30 months, but was shortened in subsequent phases to 20 months (see discussion below). Class schedules were decided in consultation with

participants in order to accommodate their other responsibilities. Generally, classes were held in the morning at youth centers when boys are in school. Girls met for four hours four times a week.

ISHRAQ'S EVOLUTION (LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE)

Since Ishraq's launch in 2001 the program has gone through three additional phases: expansion, scale-up, and the graduates phase. The program has continued to evolve, with each phase building upon the lessons of the previous one and capitalizing on prior investments in social and human capital. The program has continued to expand into new villages to teach basic literacy, knowledge, and skills and to build social support. Simultaneously, however, as early participants have matured into young women, Ishraq has evolved to help them build community participation skills and knowledge of legal rights and to address their economic needs.

Expansion Phase (2004-2007)

Leveraging lessons learned from the pilot phase, the Ishraq program expanded in August 2004 into five additional villages in Minya and in May 2006 into five villages in Beni-Suef. While program content remained largely the same, some adjustments were made to its structure.

Project teams experimented with the duration, shortening the program from 30 to 24 months and



then to 20 months to allow Ishraq graduates sufficient time to sit for the GALAE exam, obtain their birth certificates (if they did not already have them), and register for school. The shorter duration also allowed for additional cycles of Ishraq to accommodate high demand in the villages. In addition, the life skills and sports components were introduced sooner, shortly after literacy, so girls did not lose interest in the program. To further strengthen the program and ensure institutionalization, project staff reinforced the skills and capacities of promoters and created contracts with communities and parents to ensure their commitment.

For this and subsequent phases, the project team selected villages that had a minimum of 120 out-of-school girls to allow for two consecutive rounds of Ishraq. These changes could help create a “tipping point” in participating villages as a greater percentage of eligible girls participated and the program had more time to promote change. In building community support for the program, the project teams sought to establish and maintain a girls’ club in the youth center that would continue to serve as a safe space for girls.

Another important strategy introduced during this phase to encourage change at the community level was CEDPA’s New Visions program for 13-to-17-year-old boys. A companion to the New Horizons Life Skills program, the topics discussed included gender equity, partnership with women, civil and human rights, and responsibility to self, family, and community. Male promoters facilitated classes of 20 to 25 boys four times a week for six months.

Scale-up Phase (2008-2013) “Scaling-up sustainable services for rural adolescent girls”⁴

In November 2008 Ishraq was expanded to 30 more villages as part of the effort to institutionalize the program at the national level. The scale-up phase aimed to sustain the safe spaces for girls; to build the technical and managerial capacity of

youth centers, local NGOs, and youth directorates to replicate the program for rural girls (using local resources); and to promote accountability standards for national-level adoption of girl-friendly policies, measures, and best practices based on sound research and impact assessment.

Two additional program components for girls were added to the curriculum during the scale-up phase: financial education and nutrition. The program adapted Microfinance Opportunities’ generic curriculum focusing on budgeting and savings. To encourage sound financial behavior, the project also opened savings accounts for 1,523 (84%) participants and 118 promoters.⁵ Promoters and post office staff conducted orientations for parents, some of whom were initially reluctant, on the importance and the process of opening savings accounts. Promoters took participants to the post office to facilitate the process; the project deposited an initial LE100 (US\$15) in each account. Project staff had to meet with post office staff in some villages to help gain their support and cooperation.

For the nutrition component, the Egyptian Food Bank (EFB) provided girls with snacks in class and a monthly food ration box as long as they participated. In previous phases, girls sometimes did not attend class regularly. Project staff hoped the nutrition component would provide an incentive for girls and their families to enroll and attend classes regularly.

Graduation ceremonies were conducted to honor Ishraq girls and their parents at the village level. Participants used poetry, singing, drama, and puppet shows to demonstrate to the 2,230 parents and community leaders in attendance how Ishraq changed their lives. These ceremonies played an important role in convincing some parents to integrate their daughters into formal schooling.

Institutionalization: Creating Sustainable Change

Critical to the scale-up phase was the development of mechanisms and structures to institutionalize

4 The scaling-up phase was implemented by the Population Council in collaboration with Caritas, Teaming for Development, Egyptian Food Bank, and six local NGOs in Fayoum, Souhag, and Qena.

5 Participants who did not open accounts had either moved out of the village, did not have proper identification, or were younger than 16 and did not have a guardian.

TABLE 1: Participant Literacy Outcomes (Scale-up Phase)

Number of girls who enrolled in Ishraq	2,119
Number of girls who regularly attended Ishraq classes until completion	1,815
Number of girls who sat for the AEA exam for literacy	1,645
Number of girls who passed the AEA exam	1,443
Number of girls who entered school	754
Number of girls who dropped out to get married	41

Ishraq at the national and local levels. The project formed committees at village, governorate, and national levels to provide ongoing support to the program. The village committee, comprised of parents, community and religious leaders, and other influential people, conducted events to raise awareness of issues important to girls, advocated for the Ishraq program and girls, and assisted girls in accessing local village services—e.g., social, health, and economic services (banking, post office, school etc.). The governorate committee with undersecretaries from the relevant ministries met quarterly to provide support for Ishraq at the governorate level (e.g. birth certificates, medical check-ups). At the national level, memoranda of understanding were signed with the Ministry of Youth and the former Ministry of Family and Population to align Ishraq activities with existing girls' education programs undertaken by both ministries as a major step toward scale-up for sustainability.

Project staff have also led community dialogues in three of the 30 scale-up villages to discuss issues of concern to out-of-school adolescent girls and potential community mobilization activities. In Qena, for example, the Faw Qebly youth center formed a mothers' committee comprised of mothers of Ishraq participants. The committee met monthly to discuss a range of issues, including

unregistered (Sunna) marriage and its negative consequences and the positive behavioral changes they saw in their daughters as a result of their participation in Ishraq. Contracts for communities and parents to ensure program commitment have also been developed. Reflecting community commitment, the village committee in one of the villages in Qena collected money and rented a car to transport girls who lived far away to the youth center.

For national scale-up, the project aimed to build the capacity of cadres from the Ministry of Youth (MoY) at the national, governorate, district, and village levels⁶ and of staff from NGOs and youth centers to replicate Ishraq in other communities using local resources, advocacy, and networking. To do this, the project conducted trainings and developed an Ishraq "how to" toolkit. Four workshops were held to build the institutionalization team's skills to replicate the Ishraq program. During these highly participatory workshops, a procedural manual and 15 "how to" manuals⁷ were produced by the team with guidance from the Population Council on the technical aspects of implementing Ishraq, including challenges and lessons learned. As a prerequisite for graduation, institutionalization team members had to implement Ishraq in one community in each governorate using community resources. The teams received permission from the Youth Minister to add Ishraq to their roster of projects and replicated and provided technical assistance to 50 new Ishraq classes, four of which were pilots in non-Ishraq villages. Mobilizing local support and resources required intensive advocacy efforts, including community awareness events, home visits, graduation ceremonies, village committee meetings, and discussions with local government. As a result of negotiations, the General Authority for Literacy and Adult Education agreed to pay the salaries of the Ishraq promoters for nine months in the three governorates, after which the local community will be mobilized.

6 For the scale-up phase the project worked with 225 project staff in 30 youth centers and 6 NGOs and a cadre of leaders and project managers in the MoY who will assume project management.

7 A CD includes the following manuals: Implementation Procedures; Literacy; Life Skills; Monitoring and Evaluation; Basic Skills for Promoters; New Visions; Organization at the Youth Center Level; Effective Partnership; Resource Mobilization; Technical Support & Capacity Building for the Resource Mobilization Staff; Governance; Organizational Assessment; Planning; Youth Center Selection; Required Skills of Ishraq Employees at the Youth Center; Community Needs Assessment.

EXPANDING INTO A LIFE CYCLE APPROACH—THE ISHRAQ GRADUATES PHASE (2011–2013)

The experience of graduates from the early phases indicated that the transition to formal schooling was a critical time for Ishraq graduates as they faced academic, financial, and social obstacles. Project staff also noticed that once the formal program finished in a village, girls no longer had access to youth centers. Both issues were seen as critical obstacles in helping girls actively participate in their communities. In response, the Population Council in collaboration with Nahdet Misr Foundation, a local NGO, and some of the former promoters established Girls' Clubs for Ishraq graduates in two villages in Menya and four villages in Beni Suef. Girls' Clubs provided them with financial support for private tutoring to help them make the transition into formal school and also enabled them to maintain their social support system.

Given that Ishraq had been launched in 2001, by 2008 Ishraq graduates ranged in age from 18 to 28. In response to an expressed need to further develop their capacities, program staff introduced legal rights training to help graduates obtain an official identification card and increase their sense of citizenship, as well as financial education and business skills training to expand girls' livelihood opportunities, teach basic financial skills, and encourage graduates to open individual savings accounts.

The eight-day legal rights training sought to increase graduates' understanding of official documents and social status laws, e.g., marriage, divorce, custody, and child laws, and to increase linkages to relevant community services, e.g., violence against children hotline, family justice project. The four-day financial education component was the same curriculum used for Ishraq participants in the scale-up phase. The Business Skills training used PlaNet Finance's modules on savings and budgeting to provide Ishraq graduates with the basic knowledge and skills needed to start their own business and improve their marketing and financial skills (e.g., bookkeeping, balance sheets and income statements, cash flow, and marketing and negotiation). Promoters were also trained as master trainers in financial education to build on their skills and confidence and ensure program sustainability.

Once Ishraq participants had completed classes and passed the Adult Education Agency (AEA) exam, the program prepared girls to join formal schooling. Ministry of Education regulations dictated that girls have to spend one year studying from home before joining school. During that time tutoring classes were held five days a week for four hours each day at the youth center. Local teachers, some of whom donated their time, taught Arabic, English, mathematics, computer, science, and social studies. Ishraq promoters continued to provide support to the girls, as well as refresher sessions on basic health, nutrition, hygiene, and reproductive health

and a weekly sports session. The program also paid for school fees and a school uniform. While there were many examples of parent champions, many parents retained traditional attitudes toward girls' formal education. Some parents were reluctant to allow their daughters to enter formal schools because they wanted them to get married, felt that a literacy certificate was sufficient, or had safety concerns. To help persuade reluctant parents, Ishraq conducted community awareness events and home visits, using key community leaders and parents who



had allowed their daughters to enter school. Those girls who were not able to enter school (n=324) also met weekly to discuss similar issues as well as others that were important to them.

CATALYZING CHANGE: ISHRAQ'S ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

Over the past decade, Ishraq has promoted significant changes at the individual, community, and institutional level. The program has directly reached 3,321 girls and 1,775 boys in 54 villages across five governorates. It has also reached over 5,000 parents and community leaders. Rigorous evaluation has been a critical component of the program. The Population Council interviewed Ishraq and non-Ishraq participants, and parents and brothers of participants before and after the program, as well as community leaders on the village committee after the program. For the evaluation, non-Ishraq girls who were similar to Ishraq participants on important background characteristics, including poverty and education levels, were selected for comparison.

“ For the first time in my life I learned that girls have the same right to education as boys. In the past my understanding was that girls did not need to be educated because they were going to marry. ”

—ISHRAQ PARTICIPANT

The assessments looked at outcomes in five broad areas: 1) functional literacy; 2) mobility and access to safe spaces; 3) acquisition of life skills; 4) girl-empowering knowledge and attitudes; 5) parents' and brothers' girl-related attitudes. Findings from the impact assessments of the scale-up phase indicate that the program had a remarkable positive effect on participants and communities.

Individual Level—Empowering Girls

For girls, program participation has improved literacy, developed life skills, increased self-confidence, led to greater mobility and community participation, changed attitudes and behaviors, and built solidar-

“ Everything in life is based on reading; if I want to have a job, I have to be able to read. If I go to a place, I have to be able to read the signs. If I go to the doctor, I have to be able to read the prescription. ”

—ISHRAQ GIRL, GAZZAZRA

ity and social support among girls who have traditionally been socially isolated. More specifically, Ishraq participants demonstrated the following:

Improved functional literacy and educational outcomes

The Ishraq program has demonstrated marked success in preparing girls for the AEA exam and encouraging them to enter or re-enter formal schools. Some 81 percent of participants who took the AEA exam passed and more than half of those girls entered school. A youth center employee in Souhag expressed admiration at how a participant who could not spell her name when she entered the program was now a student in second preparatory.

When tested on writing, reading and comprehension, and multiplication during the endline survey of the scale-up phase, Ishraq participants performed better than non-participants. Eighty-eight percent of Ishraq participants could write their sister's name vs. 36 percent of non-participants. Ishraq participants scored higher on reading and comprehension than girls in the comparison group at endline, and over half of Ishraq participants could correctly answer a multiplication problem versus 30 percent of non-participants.

Greater girl-empowering knowledge and attitudes

Ishraq also had positive, albeit more modest, effects on participants' knowledge and attitudes related to reproductive health, marriage and child-

“ If I am educated, no one can control me. ”

—ISHRAQ GIRL, SHADAMOH

FIGURE 1 Ishraq Propensity Score Matching ATT Estimates: Self-esteem and decisionmaking

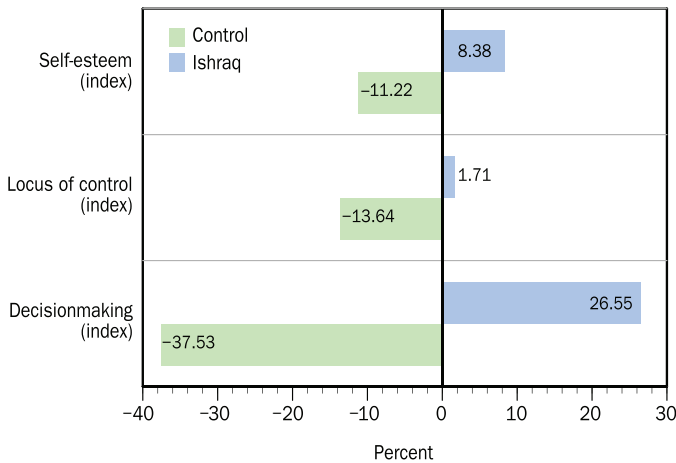


FIGURE 2 Ishraq Propensity Score Matching ATT Estimates: Attitudes toward marriage and childbearing

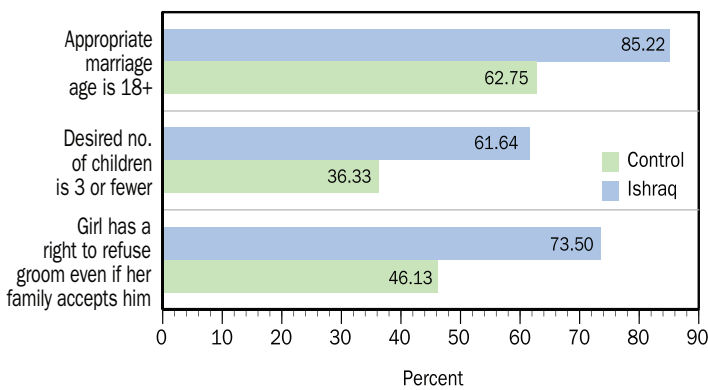
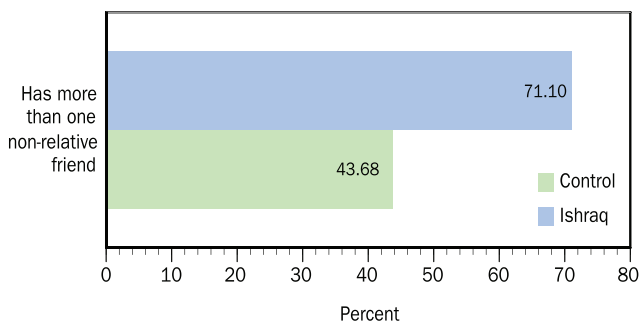


FIGURE 3 Ishraq Propensity Score Matching ATT Estimates: Peer networks



bearing, FGM/C, and gender roles. With respect to reproductive health, participants were more likely than girls in the comparison group to successfully identify at least one contraceptive method (66% versus 38%) and to know that a man is responsible for the sex of the baby (35% versus 14%).

Ishraq participants were also more likely to want to delay marriage and limit childbearing. Eighty-five percent thought that the appropriate age at marriage should be 18 or older vs. 63 percent of non-participants. Ishraq girls were also more likely to want three

“I would get married at the age of 19 to be able to carry the responsibilities that come with marriage.”
—ISHRAQ GIRL, SHADAMOH

children or less (62% versus 36%) and to feel that they should not continue to bear children until they have a son. Ishraq participants were also more likely to believe they should have a say in whom they marry.

There were also significant differences between the two groups with respect to FGM. Participants were twice as likely as girls in comparison group to know that FGM is not mandated by religion (42% versus 21%) and more than twice as likely not to have the intention to circumcise their daughters in the future (26% versus 10%).

Acquisition of life skills

Ishraq’s focus on life skills also helped girls improve a range of skills, including financial literacy, ability to think about and plan for the future, health seeking behavior, and participation in decisions that affect their lives. While participants were not more likely to be currently saving and budgeting, they were more likely to save money for an emergency (17% compared to 10%) and to know someone from whom they could borrow money in case of emergency (51% compared to 34%).

Participation in Ishraq also helped girls in planning for projects. Ishraq participants were more confident and thoughtful about starting their own business. When asked about the three things they need to think about to start their own business, half of the girls in the comparison group said they would not be able to start their own business versus only 24 percent of Ishraq participants. Indeed 15 percent of Ishraq girls planned to start, or already had started, their own project at endline, versus only 5 percent of comparison girls.

Participants also reported better health seeking behavior. They were more likely to seek advice from a health professional when sick (82% vs. 60% among non-participants), and more likely to know the location of a health unit (90% vs. 77%). Ishraq also gave girls the opportunity to learn and play sports, a skill/activity that had previously been primarily for boys. Fifteen percent of Ishraq participants reported having played sports in the month prior to the endline survey vs. only one percent of girls in the comparison group.

Findings from the scale-up phase also showed that Ishraq participants expressed greater self-confidence as they gained knowledge and skills. Promoters and community leaders on village committees stated that they noticed marked differences in how girls expressed and carried themselves. As a result, participants were likely to report having a say in decisionmaking that affects their lives. Ishraq has also fostered greater self-confidence and leadership abilities in the cadre of promoters that have been trained as part of the project. These promoters now serve as important role models for girls and their parents.

“ My brother did not approve at the beginning that I go to the classes...but having attended Ishraq classes, I have learned that a girl has the right to express her opinion and since then I have been expressing my opinion at home. ”

—ISHRAQ GIRL, FAYOUM

Increased mobility, social networks, and access to safe spaces

The structure of Ishraq also enabled girls to broaden their worlds geographically and socially. Attending classes four days a week at the youth center gave girls increased freedom of movement and increased their visibility in the community. Parents and community members became accustomed to seeing girls walking around the community. This increased mobility continued after the classes had

“ In the beginning people used to say it was a useless program. Now girls go for medical check-ups and are conscious about their health.... They went to places they have never been before; even we have not been to these places before! ”

—ISHRAQ PARENT

finished; 20 percent of Ishraq graduates reported that they had visited the youth center unaccompanied by a family member in the month prior to the endline survey, versus none of the girls in the comparison group. The youth center had become a public space where girls could go to meet and learn. Even after the program had ended, close to half of participants considered the youth center as a safe place for girls to play sports. The program even took girls outside their small villages on trips to Luxor and Qena.

In addition to expanding the physical spaces that girls could access, the program also gave them an opportunity to expand their social networks. Over 70 percent of Ishraq participants reported having more than one non-relative friend versus 44 percent of their counterparts in the comparison group. This exposure and interaction with the larger world increased their self-confidence and sense of empowerment.

Community Level—Changing Attitudes and Norms

At the community level, the Ishraq team has worked extensively through community mobilization activities and home visits to change traditional (or restrictive) gender norms. It has created a safe space in a traditionally male-dominated venue, where adolescent out-of-school girls can learn, play, and socialize. In communities where Ishraq has ended, graduates have advocated to preserve the youth center as a safe space to meet with their peers.

Activities such as the graduation ceremonies have allowed girls to demonstrate the knowledge and skills that they have acquired. Parents' atti-



tudes became more progressive about girls' roles, rights, and capacities; parents and the community became more comfortable with the youth center being a place for Ishraq girls to gather. Many parents have also developed a greater appreciation for girls' education and mobility. Girls' improved literacy skills were a life-saving tool for some families, as girls could now help family members read a doctor's prescription, street names, and signs. Knowing that their daughters were now more capable of moving around the community and understanding what was around them, mothers became more confident in giving their daughters more freedom. The knowledge and skills they learned gave them

“ My daughter was illiterate and now she is reading poetry in such a fantastic way, I swear I will support her until she completes her education. ”

—PARENT, SOUHAG GRADUATION CEREMONY

“ Ishraq girls have earned respect of their parents. Before Ishraq, they were treated as someone who cleans and serves the family, now the girl's opinion is taken into consideration and her parents care more about her. ”

—PROMOTER, QENA

greater status in the family and a greater say in decisionmaking. Parents and brothers of Ishraq girls now allow their daughters/sisters to join informal education, play sports, and continue on to formal education. Parent champions have been critical in convincing reluctant parents to allow their daughters to (re)enter formal schooling.

Reflecting the positive achievements of Ishraq, demand for the program at the community level has remained high. Many mothers told promoters that they would like to enroll their other daughters as well, and community leaders on the village committees have asked that the program be continued. Others have asked for the program to expand the age limit to include older girls, even those who are married.

Institutional Level—Toward Sustainability and Institutionalization

At the institutional level, the program has increased buy-in from governorate and national-level ministry officials. Experience showed that the buy-in and active engagement of governors on the governorate committee are critical to effective implementation and support from other relevant governorate and district-level agencies. In Souhag, the governor is the head of committee and has actively participated in the meetings, which has resulted in strong support by the undersecretaries for program activities.

Institutionalization teams have also started a second round of 50 new Ishraq classes in all Ishraq villages and in four new villages in Fayoum, Souhag, and Qena, an important step in demonstrating commitment and technical know-how. Signifying government commitment, the Adult Education Agency (AEA) has also agreed to provide promoters' salaries for the first nine months.

In an effort to maintain youth centers as safe spaces for girls, promoters have become more involved in youth centers outside of Ishraq. Two

“ Ishraq graduates who joined our school are better than some of our students who cannot even write their names. ”

—PRINCIPAL, PREPARATORY SCHOOL, QENA

promoters in Fayoum, a governorate with a large Muslim fundamentalist population, were elected to youth center boards.

THE WAY FORWARD

While Ishraq has demonstrated significant achievements in the last decade, the experience of implementing and expanding the program has also highlighted the continuing challenges of changing deep-rooted attitudes and behaviors, mainstreaming graduates, and replicating and institutionalizing Ishraq. The experience of Ishraq has also demonstrated the need to work with local communities, governments, and CSOs and develop a holistic approach to address adolescent girls' needs as they grow older.

One of the greatest challenges has been to ensure a permanent girls' safe space in youth centers. Once the program is over, girls are generally no longer given access to the youth center. Program staff have encouraged promoters to join youth center boards so that they can more effectively advocate for girls and young women within the youth center. Graduates have also been asked to become members of the youth centers so that they have equal right to access the space. The experience of the two promoters who have been elected to the board in Fayoum may provide lesson on strategies for active engagement by young women in youth centers post-Ishraq. The success of efforts to institutionalize the program within the Ministry of Youth will also be critical. Those involved in the project have been working closely with government partners to ensure they are committed to, involved in, and can expand and sustain the Ishraq program.

To ensure that girls can successfully join and succeed in formal school, procedures for integrating Ishraq graduates need to be standardized and simplified at the governorate level. For new Ishraq participants, program staff will have to continue to work with youth centers and local

and district-level governments to ensure that girls have all of their papers (e.g., birth certificate, GALAE certificate before the start of the school). In the past, girls have been unable to complete registration for school as a result of the bureaucracy that is sometimes involved in obtaining official documents. Continued support to Ishraq graduates, particularly during the first year of transition to formal schooling, is also critical. Ishraq graduates may drop out of school during the first year if they lack academic, financial, and social support. Ishraq graduates express frustration with new subjects (e.g., English, science, and geography) and often cannot afford to take private lessons. They also face an unwelcoming environment from other students and school administrators who may perceive Ishraq girls as "second class" students. While Ishraq teams have devised strategies to mitigate these challenges (e.g., tutoring, outreach to school administrators and parents, and efforts to better coordinate and standardize the mainstreaming process), these efforts need to continue. Program staff need to continue to work with Ministry of Education (MOE) officials, school administrators, and parents to support these girls. Broader dissemination and advocacy efforts are necessary to raise policymakers' awareness of the challenges of implementing programs for out-of-school girls and solicit their support in addressing those challenges.

In addition to continuing to expand Ishraq, for which community demand remains high, a new generation of girls' programs which builds on Ishraq



also needs to be developed to support graduates in exercising their rights and becoming active members of the community. The experience of Ishraq since 2001 has shown the need to adopt a life-cycle approach to effectively address out-of-school adolescent girls' needs. As Ishraq girls become young women, they need greater life and livelihoods opportunities. A safe space needs to be maintained where they and other girls can socialize and offer support to each other. The need to introduce programs for married adolescent girls, a neglected group, is also an issue that was repeatedly raised by program staff and community members.

Programs, governments, and communities need to make long-term investments to ensure significant change at the village level. Over the past decade Ishraq has sought to build the human capacity, program infrastructure (systems and mechanisms), and institutions to promote the sustainability of Ishraq for past, present, and future cohorts of adolescent girls and young women as they enter adulthood. Coupled with efforts to improve the technical capacity to implement Ishraq, NGO and CDA staff also need to be trained in advocacy, networking, and fundraising to ensure that the program can be scaled-up by leveraging local and national resources. Major corporations' support to Ishraq through their corporate social responsibility activities may be one promising source.

LESSONS LEARNED

More than ten years of experience implementing Ishraq has yielded many important lessons on recruitment strategy, program structure and implementation, capacity building, and partnerships. Among the most important lessons learned are:

1) The **involvement of local communities** through the village committees / community contracts and as champions (e.g., parents and other key community leaders) is critical to the effective implementation, ownership, and sustainability of the program. Creating an enabling environment through community mobilization/involvement is particularly critical when working with adolescent girls who do not have a voice in the public sphere.

2) **Program flexibility** in terms of scheduling (flexibility in program scheduling) is central to avoiding high absenteeism and drop-outs. Program staff developed a seasonal calendar to be aware of and adjust for seasonal absences. Attendance was quite high (80-90 percent) during the scale-up phase.

3) **Rigorous evaluation** of Ishraq has allowed for effective learning and provided a basis for course correction of the existing program as well as the design of additional program elements to address critical needs that emerge. Evaluation has also proved critical to making the case for the need to scale-up Ishraq.

4) Achieving **sustainability** requires a multi-pronged approach/strategy, which involves working with communities, government, and CSOs. Buy-in and engagement of senior officials in the governorate committee are critical to effective implementation and support from other governorate and district-level agencies. This has been highlighted in Qena, where the governor was actively engaged and consequently support from other agencies was greater.

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