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The Incoherence of Success: Intersections of Marriage and Education in a Second-Chance Girls' Education Initiative in Rural Upper Egypt

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Abstract

In Egypt, early-marriage is implicated as a barrier to educational access for girls living in rural areas. It is understood to impede women's access to education and the labor market. This paper focuses on Ishraq, a second chance girls' education initiative brought on by the Girls Education Initiative-Egypt. Using a critical poststructural conceptual framework, this paper examines how individuals associated with the Ishraq program engage in social contests concerning the relationship between marriage and education by employing a qualitative case study approach grounded in ethnographic methodological considerations. This essay argues participant's view religious life as the single most important consideration in articulating and enacting their conceptions of community development and girl's empowerment, providing a framework for understanding the relationship between marriage and education. These perspectives demonstrate how participants navigate certain structural realities in their lives and the strategies they employ in localizing the designed affects of the Ishraq program.

THE INCOHERENCE OF SUCCESS: INTERSECTIONS OF MARRIAGE AND EDUCATION IN A SECOND-CHANCE GIRLS' EDUCATION INITIATIVE IN RURAL UPPER EGYPT

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Introduction

For decades, women and girls have been the focus of international development strategies. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the social status of women is associated not only with gender equality, but also with national development policies that are often characterized as 'progressive' and 'modern' (Hasso, 2009). While development remains multi-faceted, education is widely understood to play a key role in promoting gender equality and economic empowerment. Furthermore, since the early 20th century, girls' education (along with issues related to marriage choices, family structure, and gender-based violence) remains central to the ongoing political contests concerning national identity formation and women in Egypt. For the most part, politicians, religious leaders, members of the press, and political activists have taken up the debate over girls' education in relation to its effect on marriage and the family (Russell, 2004).

In Egypt, early-marriage is one of the main barriers to educational access for girls living in rural areas (Assaad, Levison, & Zibani, 2010). Delaying marriage and reducing fertility rates among women in the Global South has been instrumental in increasing educational access for girls and women (Johnson-Hanks, 2006). Following the Millennium Declaration of 2000, Egyptian policy makers partnered with UNICEF to develop the Girls' Education Initiative Egypt (GEIE), a large-scale reform aimed at providing educational access to girls and women (UNICEF, 2007). While this effort proved successful, it did not aid in the creation of institutional mechanisms necessary for mainstreaming adolescents who had never attended school. As a result, providing academic and social support to this population became largely the responsibility of civic organizations and international NGOs (Population Council, 2007).

In 2001, largely in response to the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), a partnership between Population Council's (PC) Cairo office and Save the Children (SAVE) produced the Ishraq (Enlightenment) program. This 20-month intervention strategy targets

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out-of-school girls from the poorest rural governorates in Egypt that have some of the highest incidences of early-marriage.[2] Ishraq provided girls a chance to join their peers in middle school by preparing them for the General Authority for Literacy and Adult Education exam (GALAE).[3] Ishraq aimed to positively affect participants' sense of agency and economic empowerment by reducing the likelihood of marriage.[4] Ishraq remains in existence and has grown tremendously over the last decade. The program also reported that participants' successfully complete the GALAE exam at a rate far higher than the national average for the out of school population. Nonetheless, very little is known about the experiences of some of the earliest beneficiaries from the pilot and expansion phases since they have left the program.

The following paper exposes the disjunctures of what constitutes "success" between study participants (mostly women between the ages of 18-40), generally understood as program completion and delaying marriage. Emerging from an analysis of interview findings and field notes gathered during six months of fieldwork over a period of three years, I found that participants' notions of success varied greatly. In reference to the success of the Ishraq program, and with regard to participants' understanding of their success as beneficiaries, the findings suggest there is a link between ideas of what constitutes success and individuals' understandings of the relationship between marriage and education for girls and women in post-revolution rural Upper Egypt. This paper exposes the disjuncture by examining the ways in which success is understood and operationalized at various levels of this case study, revealing what constitutes success among participants at the most local levels (view from below), program officers at the national and provincial levels (view from the middle), and those responsible for the design and funding of the Ishraq program and policy makers situated inside and outside of Egypt (view from above). Additionally, this study examines these disparate notions of success particularly as they move across and between the areas of policy and practice, which begins the work of addressing the fundamental question: whose success matters most, and why?

In examining power differentials between stakeholders that render some versions of success more valuable than others, this work brings to the fore new ways of thinking about past, current, and future social relations in Egypt. In this paper I present examples of participants describing the ways in which they understand the meaning of success in the context of their involvement with the Ishraq program. I draw on Levinson and Sutton's (2001) *policy appropriation* framework to analyze the findings. In locating the principles that guide the Ishraq program in the discourses of global education policy, I employ the critical discourse analysis methodological approach informed by the works of Gee (1999) and Fairclough (1992). As this study illustrates, despite the complexity in how participants at the local level understand what constitutes their own success, these views are largely absent from program reports. These reports are dominated by the understandings and experiences of those involved in the design and funding of the Ishraq program. Individuals who are closest to the policy-making process make claims about what constitutes the success of others by drawing on the authoritative power of broader international development education discourses.

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[2] Here "early marriage" is defined as any marriage that takes place before the age of 18, as the Convention on the Rights of the Child suggests childhood extends until that age (UNICEF, 2005).

[3] Individuals who successfully pass the GALAE before the age of 16 are given the opportunity to (re)enter the formal, government school system. Ishraq targeted girls ages 12-15 as not to put them in direct competition and/or conflict with national literacy programs, which typically enroll children between the ages of 6-11 (Population Council, 2007).

[4] By "agency" I refer to the ability and extent to which individuals (agents) feel they can make life decisions independently of others (Ahearn, 2001).

Upper Egypt

Since the birth of the Education For All (EFA) movement, much of the focus of development concerning girls' education in Egypt has been undertaken in the southern region known as the Sa'id or Upper Egypt (UNICEF, 2007). This region includes many cities, towns, and villages, and offers residents a diversity of livelihoods in farming, manufacturing, and civil service. However, this mainly agricultural area is one of the poorest regions in the country. Additionally, school enrollment and completion rates for girls and young women in this region rank among the lowest, a trend that has slowly reversed in recent years (Population Council, 2013).

Beyond its human development profile, Upper Egypt has occupied a unique place in Egyptian nationalist narrative since the end of the colonial period. This narrow strip of the Nile valley extends more than 500 miles southward from Cairo to Aswan making it geographically, linguistically, and culturally distinct from the Nile Delta region, Mediterranean, and Red Sea coastal areas. It is also often cast in a negative light in the popular media as a remote and mostly rural region where lawlessness and poverty prevail. Tribal differences and religious fanaticism are often blamed for social and political disputes, creating a simplistic narrative of a socially, culturally, and religiously diverse region of the country (Hopkins & Saad, 2004).

As Egypt's Cairo-centric national development priorities produce initiatives aimed at eradicating behaviors deemed 'backwards' or 'pre-modern' at the regional level, the limits of the failed culture strategy become apparent. In the past, this tension between center and periphery created resentment, and while these national development strategies have brought Upper Egypt greater attention, they have come at the price of reinforcing already narrow characterizations of the region (Hopkins & Saad, 2004). These development priorities also help further dependence on the national government in Cairo and on the development community at large.

Overview of Conceptual Framework

This paper employs a critical poststructural theoretical orientation, drawing on the contributions of the field of sociology, philosophy, linguistics, and cultural anthropology. With regard to examining educational interventions, this approach attempts to apply interpretive logics to sociocultural worlds at various levels of program implementation, negotiation, and localizations (Levinson & Sutton, 2001). Guided by the assumption that Ishraq (like any program) is grounded in particular values regarding the role and purpose of education for girls and women, this approach allows for an examination of the far-reaching implications of policy formulation and the social effects that are not captured by mainstream metrics of program evaluation (Levinson & Sutton, 2001).

This paper is also informed by elements of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Until the early 1990s, much of what was identified as "discourse analysis" focused on Foucauldian conceptions regarding the power/knowledge relationship. The works of Fairclough (1992), Gee (1999), Rogers (2004), and Vavrus and Seghers (2010) represent an extension of these ideas and new directions for using discourse analysis in education policy research. As a result, CDA emerges as a conceptual framework grounded in critical theory and linguistics, drawing from the contributions of postmodernism and poststructuralism. CDA provides the appropriate conceptual framework and method of inquiry for critically examining the ways in which understandings related to marriage and girls' education are expressed in the context of the Ishraq program.

Modes of Inquiry, Research Methods, and Sampling

Utilizing a vertically-oriented design, this research explores the ways in which international and national policy discussions come to shape the construction and implementation of development programs targeting women and girls at local levels. Situating education policy as a vertical case illuminates the variable effects policies tend to produce as they move across and between different international, national, and local levels (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2009). The use of the vertical case study method furthers the claim that power and policy are inextricably linked and can be critically observed at all levels of policy design, implementation, and localization (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2009). Few scholars (Adely, 2012; Megahed & Lack, 2011) have examined the effect policy recommendations have on national and local governments of the MENA region, the development community, and most importantly members of local communities who are often the targets of these strategies.

To examine the ways in which different Ishraq stakeholders engage in the social contests around marriage and education, this essay employs a qualitative case study approach grounded in ethnographic methodological considerations. Specifically, this article draws on content from open-ended interviews and informal conversations. The purpose for using open-ended interviewing techniques was to provide participants with the opportunity to lead conversations on the thematic areas of this study, namely marriage and education. I also conducted numerous observations where many others were present as part of various meetings, events, and informal conversations.

Regarding the recruitment of participants, I originally set out to draw randomly from rosters of those who were previously registered with the program, and over the age of 18 in Beni Suef and Minya. However, these rosters were not as helpful as I anticipated since Ishraq participants registered for the program informally and not through the use of government issued documents. Further, Ishraq continues to operate with the support of SAVE in Beni Suef, making it possible to find former participants who are from the earliest phases of the program. Drawing on the perspectives of these women is essential for evaluating the lasting effects of the initiative. Additionally, individuals from this particular demographic would almost assuredly have had to consider navigating the landscape of marriage and education in their own lives either before, during, or after their participation. With the help of contacts from the locally based implementing NGO in Beni Suef, I conducted interviews with 18 women ages 18-24 in three of the five villages where Ishraq has operated, 13 non-participants from two different villages, and seven youth center staff members from three different villages. I observed and engaged in informal conversations with many others who work and live in and around the youth centers where Ishraq-related activities regularly take place.[5] I conducted the interviews in Arabic, and translated their contents into English from an audio recording.

This article also draws on the experiences of Ishraq program staff and individuals from the local implementation team who are based in various governorates across the region. This group provided a different perspective for examining the extent to which Ishraq has met its stated objectives. On occasion participants appeared at odds with the program's mission and curricular components, and they often raised concerns regarding the commitments of participants and their families. Based on the conditions of their funding, SAVE contracted a prominent locally based NGO in Beni Suef, and in turn the NGO implementation team hired women in the target villages to work with the girls on the literacy and life skills components of

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[5] Youth centers are public facilities that operate under the auspices of the Ministry of Youth and Sport, and are located in almost every rural village and urban community across Egypt (Population Council, 2013).

the Ishraq curriculum. The Ishraq Promoters, as they are known, were mainly civil servants who previously worked as either schoolteachers or with the Department of Adult Education (DAE).[6]

Soon after I arrived in Egypt during my first visit in December 2013, I learned that both PC and SAVE were no longer in contact with most of the women from the original control groups.[7] As a result, during one of my subsequent visits to Beni Suef and with the help of two female volunteers whom I met through my work with one of the local implementing NGOs, we decided to travel to two of the original control villages and walk through the streets asking women who are of a similar demographic as the former Ishraq participants, if they would participate in the study. We were fortunate to have visited on a Wednesday, which is typically when farmers and artisans bring their goods to sell at the market and is frequented by the residents of all the surrounding villages. Also, since this was during the middle of the holy month of Ramadan, the market was particularly busy, filled with mostly women buying and selling to stock up for the coming week of fasting. A control group was formed from those who agreed to participate during this visit.

Success and the Hyperbolic Anecdote: Personal Triumphs as Evidence of Success
In December 2013, I attended the *Neqdar Nesharek* (We can participate) workshop in the seaside resort town of Gouna on Egypt's Red Sea coast. During this time I met with former Ishraq program officers retained by the PC as part of the administrative units charged with overseeing the Neqdar Nesharek program (Neqdar). Neqdar, an entrepreneurship-training program targeting women in Upper Egypt (the same communities where Ishraq was implemented), is understood to represent the logical success to the Ishraq program. Consequently, PC continued to employ many of the Ishraq program officers as part of Neqdar's implementation team.

As the second day of the workshop drew to a close, I spoke with Ashraf[8] over tea as we waited for dinner. I met Ashraf, an Ishraq program officer in his mid-40s, on a number of occasions during my previous research visits to Egypt. Like most of Ishraq's local program officers, Ashraf is originally from Upper Egypt, and among the many duties that come with his title is the responsibility for promoting the principles of Ishraq to the local implementation team. Each time we met, Ashraf was sharply dressed and on occasion I would joke with him and say, "I hope when I am your age, I look as sharp as you do" to which he would respond, "Mr. Mohamed, are you calling me old? Don't worry about it, you look just fine." We developed a friendly rapport, and this affinity served me well during this meeting, both personally and with regard to this research.

What started as a conversation about family quickly moved to politics, and before long we began discussing his experiences working with Ishraq. Ashraf has been working with NGOs in Egypt for the last decade and at our meeting he had been with PC for close to four years. One of the first things we discussed was that the goals associated with development projects are often short-lived. Ashraf claimed that his experiences working in the development field left him feeling like interventions often fail to live up to the expectations of participants and

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[6] The Department of Adult Education serves as the primary governmental partner for all public or private initiatives working in the areas of literacy and/or basic education (Population Council, 2013).

[7] During the pilot and expansion phases, PC made a significant effort to study the program's effect on participants. This was done mainly by comparing Ishraq beneficiaries with a control group in a quasi-experimental research design on a number of relevant areas (Population Council, 2007).

[8] All names of persons and some names of places in this study have been changed to protect the privacy of respondents.

program staff. With regard to Ishraq, he remarked that when he first joined PC he was not convinced the program would be successful in providing opportunities for girls and women in rural communities. I asked Ashraf if he could elaborate, and he went on to explain his position in greater detail:

> I feel this way because many of these girls and young women come from parts of Egypt that are familiar to me. I felt like no matter how much work we do these girls would still suffer the same fate. I assumed all parents we would be dealing with would be resistant to the idea of their daughters leaving work in the fields and in the homes to study in school.

However, Ashraf shared that as time passed his views began to change. He went on to remark this was largely a result of encounters with families, specifically fathers. "Parents' willingness to support their daughters gave me a renewed sense of hope in the initiative and the belief the program was making a difference in the lives of young women," he stated. Ashraf recounted the story of one father that he felt stood out as the greatest example of how Ishraq has been successful.

> After meeting one father in particular, my perspective, or should I say my anxiety about Ishraq not being successful, shifted dramatically. While making our home visits in the community, I encountered a father that was not only resistant to the idea of his daughter studying at the youth center, he was insulted that I would even ask him to join our program. He told us that, 'a young girl stays close to her family until she is ready for marriage.' Yes, he was one of the most aggressive parents we ever encountered. He went so far as to ask us never to come back to his home again. Amazingly, this same father after acquiescing to our request and receiving some incentives to participate came to me six months later as one of the happiest men in the village. He told me that he was prepared to sell all of his clothes and all of his furniture if it meant that his daughter could finish college and become a physician. Mr. Mohamed, I can't tell you how wonderful that made me feel. I knew then that this program was different than anything I had experienced previously. I never imagined that people from these communities could shift their thinking about issues related to their children so dramatically.

After recounting this story, Ashraf shared, despite the challenges he and others faced in their work, this story represents the extent to which the program had been successful. Critical self-reflection was relatively absent in Ashraf's discussion of how his expectations of the program where challenged by this father's actions. Why was it that in retelling his experience Ashraf did not appear interested in understanding this particular father's initial reaction to his daughter participating in the Ishraq program? I begin with this anecdote to illustrate the ways in which some participants frame their own personal and professional triumphs as evidence of Ishraq's success in meeting its stated objectives. The use of hyperbole was common in many of the stories participants related as they expressed their views of this intervention. For Ashraf and other program officers, self-satisfaction was often privileged in conversations where participants used personal stories to describe their notions of success. These individuals almost never shared that they benefited from the relationships they developed with members of the local implementation or Ishraq participants. When former beneficiaries shared experiences

understood by other stakeholders as outside of the typical framework for what constitutes success, they are mostly dismissed. This was based on the understanding that these views are a result of the same "negative cultural habits" Ishraq set out to change. Commending or even demonstrating support for beneficiaries, when they made decisions in their personal lives that were understood as contradictory to the principles of the Ishraq program, was perceived as an endorsement of negative cultural habits.

The following example illustrates this complicated dynamic. When I met with Nada, a 24 year-old former Ishraq beneficiary, she told me she left the Ishraq program a couple of months before finishing. As a result, she never sat for the literacy exam that would have allowed her to continue to middle school. Instead, she married within a year of leaving the program, months before her 17ᵗʰ birthday. Nada seemed happy to talk about her experience, expressing that she learned a great deal from her teachers and friends. When I asked her to think back about what she found most helpful about the experience she said, "I learned to read; at the time I used that to help my mother. Now that I myself am a mother I can support my own children as they grow and learn." When I asked program officers and promoters about former students like Nada they would often lament that they never completed the program. Some of the promoters who married and had children in their teens believed young women like Nada made the same mistake they had when they were young.

The difference was, as Fathiya, a 29 year-old Ishraq promoter stated, "they (Ishraq participants or beneficiaries) have an opportunity we never had, and still some cannot help from falling into the same situation." This example illustrates how difficult it can be to find positive characterizations of individuals who are themselves the targets of development interventions, as these perspectives are often undervalued or overlooked. As a result, mapping the terrain of success and its disjuncture as articulated at the different levels of this vertical case study begins with the view from the most local levels.

Notions of Success from Below

When asked to describe the importance of education for girls and women, Ishraq program officers often expressed what they believe is the intrinsic value of education and schooling. In one conversation with Yasser (an Ishraq program officer), education was described as "the key to growth and development, not just for the community but for the whole of Egypt." He also went on to suggest that, "promoting girls' education is important since it is so undervalued in primarily agricultural communities where we are working. The lifestyles of most farmers limit girls' choices." Ishraq beneficiaries, on the other hand, provided generally more varied assessments of the importance of education in their own lives based on their particular circumstances. None of the participants claimed education was inherently bad or problematic. However many discussed some of the challenges they faced in their educational journey that led them to doubt the claim that schooling is necessarily right for everyone. Regardless of their involvement in Ishraq, all participants generally described marriage as antithetical to continuing their education, although not in contradiction to what they understood as successful participation in Ishraq. Soad, a former Ishraq beneficiary in her early 20s, addressed this issue directly:

> How can I maintain the home, take care of the kids, and my husband, and still find time and energy to go to school… marriage and education just do not go together. That doesn't mean that I was not successful in Ishraq. I finished the program, moved on to middle school and left to get married. What I mean is

that I feel I learned a lot from the program even if I didn't finish all of my schooling.

Soad's comments are similar to those shared by Nada earlier and illustrate an understanding of success that is not necessarily bound by a narrow and linear view of what it means to be successful. I included this statement from Soad, as this is a view shared by many former Ishraq participants. More importantly, it challenges the idea that former participants cannot experience success on their own terms. A consideration of marriage also emerged in my conversation with Shaymaa, a former beneficiary from a neighboring village in Beni Suef. However, unlike Soad, Shaymaa discussed how she understood the link between education and marriage choice. In the following example, Shaymaa introduced to this analysis the idea of education as a tool for enhancing one's social and economic status, specifically unrelated to a woman earning in the labor market. This is articulated as the extent to which a woman who has acquired certain academic credentials is able to assert greater control over the conditions related to her choosing a marriage partner.

> One of the reasons I want to be educated is that so I can marry someone who is also educated. This is how I understand success. I have to be able to understand him, and he has to be able to understand me. I mean, education is light, and it is something very nice and one can have a nice life this way. When I finished middle school and went to apply to high school, a distant cousin of mine came to propose, and he has a high school diploma. I said to my family I want to be able to complete high school so that I can have a diploma like him, that's something nice I think. People who are educated are much happier and their lives are quite pleasant. I learned this from this program.

Ishraq participants also seemed open to representing issues related to marriage in their communities in more complex ways than were articulated by policy makers and, by extension, Cairo-based program officers. Soad's suggestion that marriage and education are seemingly incompatible does not take away from her belief that she learned a great deal from being involved in the Ishraq program. This focus on the tension between marriage and education speaks to a complexity in the experiences of former participants that is largely absent from what is included in the policy documents and program reports discussed later in this article.

The following conversation further reveals how success for many promoters is mostly understood through the lens of personal and professional triumph, similar to my exchange with Ashraf discussed earlier in this paper. Wafaa, a 27 year-old Ishraq promoter from rural Beni Suef, spoke about the personal investment that promoters make in the lives of Ishraq participants. Her story demonstrates the difficulty in promoters' ability to appreciate the experiences of their students without passing judgment or invalidating their experiences, whether similar or different from their own.

> I teach Arabic, and I love working with these girls because I can provide them with the opportunities that I did not have. I was married at 15 and had my first child shortly after. If it wasn't for my husband and his studies in Arabic, I also may not have had the chance to study Arabic later in life. Before working with Ishraq, I was a literacy instructor for a public literacy institute in this village… I think these girls getting married, you know is a huge problem, I don't want them to make the same mistake that I made. I was fortunate to have the [sic]

opportunity to go back to school and get a diploma after having children. These girls will not be as fortunate if they do not take control of their situation and take advantage of this opportunity.

This testimony demonstrates that while Wafaa explicitly stated that she is opposed to girls marrying before they finish school, she admitted that it was through meeting her husband that she became interested in Arabic. She went on to describe that for the last five years she had used her love of Arabic to remain employed and happy. This variation of perspectives shows that participants understand that structural limitations in their communities disproportionately affect women and the poor. However, they also suggest a level of complexity in how participants describe and navigate the issues that impact girls and women in their community.

Other participants portray the complexity and dynamism revealed in the social contests surrounding marriage and education. This is particularly relevant to the ways in which participants articulate what it means to be a successful woman. Interestingly, in examining the differences between Ishraq beneficiaries and their non-Ishraq counterparts, I only found there to be variation in their educational attainment. While there was greater educational diversity among non-Ishraq participants, members of the two groups raised some of the same issues about the effect of early marriage on women's educational prospects. Ishraq participants would discuss these issues in direct reference to what was learned during their time in the program. The following perspectives (two former Ishraq beneficiaries and one from a control village) demonstrate that participation in Ishraq does not appear to be a distinguishing factor in how these women articulate what constitutes being a successful woman:

Fatin (Non-Ishraq) age 22:
I just finished my first year in college. I am studying history, and I am not looking to get married anytime soon. I would like to be a professor and leave the country altogether. My parents have suggested I get married many times, but they know by now it will not happen until I decide the time is right.

Yusra (Ishraq) age 24:
I expected to continue my education. I am now finishing high school. I mean we are not farmers; education is important to us. My parents may have been uneducated, but they want a better life for us then they had for themselves.

Noura (Ishraq) age 21:
You know when a woman gets married and has a child and her child comes home after school and asks, 'How do I do this thing or that.' When a child finds their mom can't help them then how can they imagine themselves being anything other than un-educated. But, when a mom can grab a notebook and say to her child do such and such, then the child will grow up the right way and so will the rest of the family.

Where former Ishraq participants described their understanding of these issues in direct reference to their experience in the program, non-participants similarly acknowledged their awareness and understanding of these issues, instead referencing their experiences in public school or in their personal lives. Participants and non-participants defined what it meant to be a successful woman in ways outside of the narrowly defined notions of success expressed by program staff and Ishraq program materials.

Promoting gender equality remains the core principle behind Ishraq's effort to delay marriage and is heavily referenced by program staff and in policy documents. Gender equality was also one of the rallying points of the 2011 Egyptian revolution and has been met with excitement, skepticism, indifference, and even opposition by the public and Egypt's social, political, and religious institutional structures. The perception and belief in endless possibilities for participants can be gleaned from Ishraq program documents and is demonstrated in the cooperation between stakeholders that was expressed during my visits to Beni Suef. However, while participants' perceptions of early marriage may have changed at the conclusion of their involvement with Ishraq, years later many women have left school or have experienced significant interruptions in their educational journeys.

It is also important to note that at the time of the interviews, a significant proportion of study participants' were either married (some with children) or engaged to be married. In the end, while the contests over marriage and what it means to be an educated women represented here are ever evolving, it is clear that most, if not all, participants conflated these two issues in making their case for what they believe are the sorts of lives women ought to be leading. Furthermore, the experiences of women at the most local levels, while illustrative of a great diversity of viewpoints, are in no way authoritative enough to affect the views of those situated more closely to the policy-making process.

Notions of Success from the Middle

The following section begins the work of juxtaposing notions of success as articulated by former Ishraq beneficiaries with those of promoters, program officers, and those responsible for the funding and design of the Ishraq program at the national and provincial levels. In a 2007 study conducted by PC the organization draws heavily on the aforementioned quasi-experimental research design to illustrate the variable affects of the Ishraq program. The study also included anecdotes of participants, their families, and Ishraq promoters. This was done to inform program officers and donors of the areas requiring the most attention, as well as to identify potential areas of growth during the subsequent scaling-up phase. This study concluded Ishraq participants generally outperformed their non-Ishraq counterparts in the area of functional literacy based on respondents' ability to write their sister's name.

It was also reported that 81 percent of Ishraq participants who took the GALAE exam passed, and more than half entered middle school at some point after their completion of the Ishraq program. Through analyzing data gathered from surveys and questionnaires, this study indicated that Ishraq had a generally positive effect on participants and their respective communities in the areas of mobility and access to safe spaces, acquisition of life skills, girl-empowering knowledge and attitudes, and parents' and brothers' girl-related attitudes (Population Council, 2007). The original program assessment proves valuable in many ways, as it gives us an indication of how participants performed on the GALAE exam, among other areas of the program. However, this section focuses on problematizing more broadly the described successes of Ishraq by drawing on the aforementioned concept of *appropriation* (Levinson & Sutton, 2001).

In a later work, Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead (2009) reassert that appropriation is understood "as a form of creative interpretive practice necessarily engaged in by different people involved in the policy process" (p. 768). The authors then go on to suggest, "when nonauthorized policy actors—typically teachers and students, but possibly, too, building administrators—appropriate policy, they are in effect making new policy in situated locales and communities of practice" (p. 768). This work is particularly useful to juxtapose the stated objectives of the program, an intervention made possible by the GEIE, with the experiences of

past participants and non-participants and program staff and volunteers. In my interactions, I noted the role religion played in shaping the ways in which participants appropriated certain aspects of the program in localizing its aims and articulating its successes.

Upon arriving to the youth centers, I spent a fair amount of time talking with former participants, promoters, and other staff. Throughout my conversations and during interviews with participants, the topic of literacy was brought up frequently and in relation to the other broad focal areas of the program. Ishraq Promoters often discussed its value to girls and women in their respective communities in the context of the social, spiritual, and functional returns it provides. During one particular conversation at the Youth Center in Manshiet Yusuf, Ms. Mona (Ishraq Promoter) suggested that, "many of these girls we work with don't even know how to perform their prayers," to which Ms. Hanim (Ishraq Promoter) added, "some parents prefer their daughters simply do as they are told, which means if there is something can give her some freedom from her family she should avoid it altogether." In order to convince families to see the relative value in supporting their daughters' education, Ms. Hanim employed rhetoric of piety to appeal to what she described are "religious parents, who are willing to be moved by talk of religion or spirituality." After some additional probing regarding the particulars of the approaches promoters used to compel parents to allow their daughters to participate in the Ishraq program, Ms. Hanim offered the following description:

> We used religion to capture the attention of parents. We live in this community, so parents have to give us a chance to talk with them about their children since they trust us. Parents around here talk about Islam and the importance of family, but they don't like to think about what the Quran says about education and equality for women. So in order to convince families to participate in the program we would tell them that religion permits women to be equal to men and that their girls should be able to read. We also talk to them about what they can gain when their daughters are able to read; they can help their parents in different ways not just in the field and doing housework.

This example highlights the implications of working to appeal to the perceived religious and spiritual sensibilities of target communities. Further, it is an example of how promoters operationalize the narrow views articulated by Cairo-based staff in order to reach their goals of recruiting and retaining beneficiaries. The Ishraq Program final report (2013) asserts that girls and women in rural Upper Egypt lack agency, which is described as an essential condition for upward social mobility. This report forwards the argument that 'socially-conservative' norms and 'cultural' values, as well as poor economic conditions, are largely to blame and that the Ishraq program provides an appropriate framework for creating sustainable and positive change. With the help of local volunteers, program officers began reaching out to religious and community leaders, as they felt that they could help them convince families to allow their daughters to join Ishraq. While participants expressed facing periodic challenges, there was a general consensus that having access to and the support of most community and religious leaders provided Ishraq the legitimacy it needed for operating effectively. In some cases this endorsement could lead parents to allow their children to participate in the program even if they did not necessarily appreciate all that it claimed to offer.

In the aforementioned report, community and religious leaders are implicitly characterized as constraining the social, political, and economic lives of women. The narratives that are included only serve to reinforce these static notions rather than acknowledge the rich and ongoing social and political contests occurring between and among various stakeholders

and beneficiaries. Implicating, rather simplistically, religious leaders as overwhelmingly enforcing and reinforcing religious social codes that negatively affect women obscures important struggles for autonomy present in contemporary rural Upper Egypt. With regard to the Egyptian case, this consideration emerges from a particular set of historical developments and is uncovered by examining what constitutes success for participants. This in turn minimizes the role complex sociocultural dimensions play in shaping Egypt's unique circumstances and plays uncritically into the assumption that religion (i.e. Islam), and more importantly religious leaders, are to blame for the subjugation of women in Egypt.

Most of what has been discussed until this point centers on the cultural considerations that play a part in how promoters localize the designed effects of the Ishraq program. Included in my encounters and interactions I found that participants also worked to appeal to the financial needs of members of the target communities. In my discussion with one civil servant and the director of a youth center in rural Beni Suef, Mr. Emad, he suggested that he and others from the center regularly provided financial and/or material support to families whose children participated in Ishraq. He went on to share that providing this support to individuals in the community was an effective recruitment strategy. For new Ishraq graduates, the economic support was particularly helpful for those making the transition to middle school, as they were made to pay school fees. As we talked further about some of the financial difficulties facing many of the Ishraq beneficiaries and the ways in which youth center staff typically responded to these challenges, Mr. Emad shared the following:

> Most parents here don't like the idea of their daughters coming to Youth Centers because they think they will mix with boys. The rest is purely financial. Fathers are working for a wage, so they don't have a steady income. When I would ask during home visits why his daughter was absent, the father would say, 'I am sorry but I needed her help in the field; I can't afford to send her every time.' It became clear that if we wanted the girls to stay in the program, we need to help these families make up the income they would lose if their daughters were not working. I use to tell our NGO partners that they needed to do something, and they eventually did by buying some small personal items for the girls. After this, we would go to the parents and say, 'Now let your child enroll in our program, even if for only one day a week.' This is the noble and right thing to do because some of these girls are really very bright and nothing is going to change if we don't convince parents to send their girls to school.

It is common for programs like Ishraq to use incentives to promote participation. However, it was my understanding that program officers never intended to offer material support to girls or their families in exchange for their participation. Financial assistance was originally only provided in cases where participants needed birth certificates and national ID cards in order to sit for the GALAE exam. While not alone in suggesting the importance of using incentives to encourage participation, Mr. Emad presented the most reasoned and clearest example of program functions being shaped by individuals working to implement Ishraq.

Based on this analysis, participant's experiences necessarily amount to more than exemplars of Ishraq's successes, participants' (dis-)satisfaction, and/or specific individuals taking ownership of the program. The basic tenants of Ishraq remain contested, and this is evidenced by the ways in which program staff and volunteers leveraged their positional authority to promote particular understandings, using religion and its presumed relationship to literacy, community development, empowerment, and ultimately success.

Notions of Success from Above

The Ishraq Dissemination Conference, as discussed previously, served to provide Ishraq stakeholders and members of the broader Egyptian development community with the opportunity to reflect on key highlights and challenges with the program. The audience, made up mainly of civil servants representing Egyptian and non-Egyptian NGOs, scholars, and members of the media, came from across Cairo and surrounding governorates to hear PC representatives discuss Ishraq, as well as to celebrate its eventual "institutionalization" of becoming a Ministry of Education sanctioned program. Since the Dutch Embassy in Cairo contributed a significant financial award for the last phase of the program, Population Council chose to honor the Netherlands government by making its ambassador to Egypt an honored guest.

In his remarks to the audience, Ambassador Gerard Steeghs congratulated PC for their support of broad social reform in Egypt through education. He suggested that the Egyptian Government should be commended for its efforts to increase school enrollment for girls and women over the last decade, referencing the GEIE and its movement towards progress. Conversely, he cited Egypt's ranking near the bottom of many leading human development indices as evidence that the work towards realizing gender equality in Egypt is incomplete. In explaining the persistent challenges to addressing gender-based discrimination in Egypt and the gaps in educational attainment between females living in rural areas and all other populations, Steeghs suggested the following:

> …poverty in addition to the reluctance of families to send their daughters to co-educational schools or in order to have them married at an early age are among the factors. This no doubt gives many women a much worse starting position when they look for work, and hinders their ability to make well-informed decisions that can enable them to escape poverty and make decisions that improve their well-being as well as that of their families.

These remarks draw (perhaps both knowingly and unknowingly) from policy documents and the associated directive of the UNGEI. The UNICEF's (2000) *Action Now* document states the goal of the UNGEI is to, "mount a sustained campaign to improve the quality and availability of girls' education" (p. 2). When taken with the following statement from the UNICEF's (2000) UNGEI "Concept Paper", the UNGEI makes the case for the promotion of girls' education as part of a larger strategy aimed at reducing rates of poverty worldwide. Steeghs' comments overlap with the language of the UNGEI, as seen in the following statement:

> Girls' education is a fundamental human right and an essential element of sustainable human development. The Girls' Education Initiative is envisaged as an integral and essential element in the global effort to reduce poverty. The international poverty reduction goals will not be reached without concerted effort to eliminate discrimination against women and girls and to achieve gender equality, especially in education. (UNICEF 2000, p. 1)

These indirect references to poverty alleviation and gender equality are a form of what Fairclough (1992) calls *constitutive intertextuality,* as they echo the principles that underpin the UNGEI. Intertextuality refers to a process whereby texts are brought together to create and transform meaning (Gee, 1999). Steeghs also directly references the GEIE when discussing the developments related to girls' education during the last decade, representing a form of what Fairclough (1992) identifies as *manifest intertextuality.* The argument he makes for promoting girls' education follows the same linear and deterministic configuration as the case being made by the UNGEI: 1) education is a human right; 2) education for girls and women is an essential component for the existence of gender equality; 3) gender based inequality in education can be addressed through the promotion of educational access and quality for girls and women; and 4) together, the preceding provide a basis for addressing the challenge of global poverty. Fairclough (1992) argues intertextuality is explicated by the ways in which authors of texts communicate with their audiences through leveraging previous (legitimated) knowledge, and as a result, contribute to and reinforce existing discourse/s. Examining the intertextuality of Steeghs remarks reveals how they relate to the principles of the GEIE and more broadly to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is an essential element for uncovering the hidden discourse/s found in the texts under study in representing their relationship to social practices and the social world at large. This example also makes clear the role power plays in legitimating particular understandings concerning the relationship between marriage and education for girls and women in Egypt, and how these understandings simultaneously privilege certain notions of success while undermining all other forms.

The ambassador concluded his comments by suggesting that Ishraq's success is predicated on its ability to contribute to social and political reform and of transforming intergroup relations in rural Upper Egypt. In his concluding comments he stated:

> Upper Egypt at this point in time appears in the headlines sometimes with news that is disconcerting, particularly where harmonious and equal relations with different groups are concerned. I hope that this activity (Ishraq program) will also make, apart from the points I have already mentioned, a small contribution to raising citizens who are not only strong and independent, but also in possession of a wider view of the world that enables them to live peacefully and in a good understanding with those in Egypt who have different beliefs or have different backgrounds.

These comments were delivered in a tone congruent with the rhetorical approaches employed by authors of the GEIE and Ishraq program reports. Ambassador Steeghs' comments linked the absence of a modern and liberal democratic citizenry (narrowly defined) in rural Upper Egypt to explain the disharmony and sociopolitical inequality that prevail in this region. By imbuing his comments with authority and legitimacy, Steeghs was able to make a claim that there is an incontrovertible link between the principles that underpin the GEIE (poverty alleviation and educational access for girls), 'modern' and 'liberal' democratic values, and equality for woman and girls in the Egyptian context. While Steeghs' characterizations conflated being an upstanding citizen in a modern liberal democracy with being an educated women in rural Upper Egypt, it was possible for him to make this bold claim through leveraging previous knowledge about commonly held beliefs in international development and girls education policy, all of which are enhanced by his position as the representative of the Netherlands government in Egypt. At the heart of Steeghs' argument was the notion that promoting girls' education is part of a democratic ideal congruent with the social and political

values of the Netherlands and illustrated the extent to which policy discussions, and the interventions they tend to produce, are value laden and ideologically bound.

Steeghs' comments reminded me of a conversation I had with Alaa, a former PC researcher. He asked me what I found most interesting about my research. Seizing the opportunity to share ostensibly critical observations (and also playing the role of devil's advocate) with someone very familiar with the program, I remarked that I found it peculiar that such a large number of former participants had either been married with children or were engaged to be married at the time of my fieldwork. I explained that from reading program documents, attending various conferences, and spending time with program officers, my impression was that former participants had largely remained in school and in most cases did not get married until well into their late 20s. To which Alaa responded, "What gave you that idea? Sure, this is the ideal, but that would be next to impossible to achieve." I told him that, while it may have been wrong for me to assume this was the case, it was my understanding that reducing incidences of early marriage was one of the pillars of the program. Moreover, since most assessments suggest Ishraq had been successful in 'correcting' neglectful behaviors — changing participants' attitudes around early marriage and childrearing— I had difficulty understanding why the program had been described *as a success* in this particular way. I asked him, "Why do you think there are so many Ishraq beneficiaries who are married and have children before the age of 20?" In response to my half-hearted yet emphatic critique (in the sense that this was mainly an attempt to enhance the intensity of the conversation), Alaa looked at me sternly and exclaimed, "You are absolutely right, and what you are suggesting matters a great deal in how we should evaluate the success of the program, in fact this is my understanding as well." He went on to add that, "…what matters most is that many of these girls (former participants) will never return to school, especially those who got married." This example speaks to the implications of the narrow and rigid conceptions of success. This view privileges the notion that for programs like Ishraq, success is almost exclusively defined by the extent to which participants abandon certain "cultural practices" as a result of their experience.

Views from Across and Between the Vertical Case

Vavrus and Bartlett (2009) argue that power and policy are inextricably linked and can be critically observed at all levels of the vertical case: policy design, implementation, and localization. Moreover, the transversal elements—the views from across and between the different levels — make clearer the exercises of structural power as they affect and are affected by individuals and groups situated at various levels of the vertical case. By most accounts, an overly simplified characterization of the instrumental value of education—to lift people out of poverty and into development— have been critiqued, and in many cases altogether dismissed. With the 2015 deadline for the MDGs upon us, multilateral development agencies in recent years have made fewer references explicitly calling education a solution for all social problems. With regard to the MENA region, 'empowerment' still remains the end game for most development theorists and practitioners, where education for women and girls is understood to serve as the primary vehicle for creating and sustaining change (Abu-Lughod, Adely, & Hasso, 2009). Adely (2012) discussed the ways in which young women in Jordan understand how others (particularly in the West) perceive them and are aware of the narratives that describe education as the gateway to empowerment. Adely (2012) went on to suggest that the homogenization of women in MENA and the treatment of their cultural 'condition' coupled with prevailing notions of agency and successful womanhood "makes it difficult for us to recognize alternative goals and behaviors as important and powerful" (p. 13).

Two key transversal elements revealed how participants have internalized simplistic characterizations of women in MENA, and that disrupting "local culture" is the pre-occupation of those responsible for the design and implementation of the Ishraq program. Urban Egyptians working in remote areas understand their rural counterparts as suffering in much the same way as others describe the plight of women across the entire MENA. In these contexts, success among those responsible for the funding and design of the Ishraq program is largely defined by successfully disrupting "bad" cultural habits. These interferences inevitably render the complexity described in the preceding accounts as either invisible or non-existent. Moreover, the tropes of "education not marriage" are so pervasive that even participants whose experiences contradict this narrative are left with few options for describing what is generally understood as the inherent value of getting an education.

Conclusion

This article has sought to further understandings of the ways in which participants at the various levels of this case study articulate notions of success that affect and are affected by local, regional, national, and international gender equity contests. What is revealed from examining the various notions of success as articulated by participants is that the dominant perception of gender relations in Egypt is operating mostly within a rigid cultural domain. These understandings uncritically represent Egyptian women as victims of their own customs, possessing little to no transformative agency to affect their personal plight.

When describing the success of the program, Ishraq beneficiaries often cited Ishraq's stated ability to change the course of their respective lives. However, once prompted to elaborate, most participants described their life circumstances as largely unchanged. This demonstrates the tension that exists between how program officers understand the success of the program as measured by desired outcomes, as well as how former participants choose to express the relationship between their past experiences and their current outlook on issues like marriage and education. However, the continued tension over issues related to marriage and education described in this study take place at a time when the rules of social and political engagement are constantly shifting. For some, this revolutionary moment may mean possibilities expand, while for others they may be further constrained.

This article also argues that participants' religious lives and spiritual well-being appear central to the ways in which they articulate and enact their conceptions of empowerment and success, particularly among locally-based program officers. This is not to suggest that former participants and program staff did not find their experiences with Ishraq to be generally meaningful and/or fulfilling. In examining the successes of the Ishraq program through the lens of appropriation, what is revealed in participants' experiences cannot be simply reduced to responses to base line and end line surveys. The products of policy appropriation can be observed by examining the ways in which participants navigated certain structural realities in their lives en route to localizing the designed effects of the Ishraq program.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this article reveals that notions of success expressed from the most local levels of this case study wield considerably less authoritative power in comparison to the views of those who are responsible for the design and funding of the Ishraq program. Moreover, while remaining steadfast in their conviction that the Ishraq program has produced positive outcomes for participants through assessing their performance on the GALAE, most stakeholders also frame success as the extent to which participants' attitudes regarding the social status of women are affected by the intervention. Disjunctures in the ways participants articulate the success of the Ishraq program represent more than the diversity of views held by stakeholders. Through examining the power differentials that exist

between stakeholders, this study has revealed that some versions of success are constructed as more valuable than others.

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