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## Providing new opportunities to adolescent girls in socially conservative settings: The Ishraq program in rural Upper Egypt—full report

Martha Brady  
*Population Council*

Ragui Assaad  
*Population Council*

Barbara L. Ibrahim

Abeer Salem  
*Population Council*

Rania Salem

*See next page for additional authors*

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## Authors

Martha Brady, Ragui Assaad, Barbara L. Ibrahim, Abeer Salem, Rania Salem, and Nadia Zibani

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to adolescent girls in  
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**The Ishraq program**  
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FULL REPORT



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# The **Ishraq** program in rural Upper Egypt

Martha Brady, Ragui Assaad, Barbara Ibrahim,  
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One Dag Hammarskjold Plaza  
New York, New York 10017  
[www.popcouncil.org](http://www.popcouncil.org)

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## Preface

**I**n Egypt, as in many other countries of the developing world, ensuring a successful transition to adulthood for young people is an urgent concern of policymakers and society at large. This concern, however, is often expressed narrowly in terms of finding jobs for the multitude of high school and university graduates who seek to enter the labor market every year, or providing affordable housing to (mostly urban) young couples wishing to marry. While these are clearly important goals, they ignore the problems and challenges faced by the most disadvantaged young people in Egypt. The evidence shows clearly that girls in rural areas who have either missed out altogether on the opportunity to attend school or have dropped out before completing their primary schooling are the most disadvantaged group of young Egyptians. Although this group is sizable, adolescent girls remain largely absent from public discourse because they have few advocates in seats of power and few opportunities to articulate demands on their own behalf.

The following report tells the story of Ishraq—a program designed to give these girls a second chance. In the absence of opportunities provided

by programs such as Ishraq, these girls are generally destined for a life of poverty, illiteracy, early marriage, high fertility, and poor health. Ishraq attempts to take advantage of one of the final opportunities to change the life prospects of these girls, namely by intervening during the period of early adolescence. Second-chance programs, such as Ishraq, are critical in settings where a large number of girls have not had access to public schooling and primary health care—whether because of inadequate service delivery, poor or ill-informed decisions by parents, or poverty. By intervening with these girls at this point in their life cycle, Ishraq seeks to address the root causes of intergenerational poverty, high levels of fertility, and poor health. The pilot phase of Ishraq described in the following pages has shown that a well-designed, integrated program can have a significant positive impact in improving the life chances of poor rural girls.

**RAGUI ASSAAD**  
Population Council, Egypt

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Members of the Population Council Ishraq Study Team in Cairo were Alyce Abdalla, Zeinab Gamal, Russanne Hozayin, Barbara Ibrahim, Ray Langsten, Doaa Mohie, Abeer Salem, Rania Salem, and Nadia Zibani. Members in New York were Martha Brady, Wesley Clark, and Michelle Skaer.

Our heartfelt thanks go to many people and organizations. First and foremost we extend our

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MARTHA BRADY  
RAGUI ASSAAD  
BARBARA IBRAHIM  
ABEER SALEM  
RANIA SALEM  
NADIA ZIBANI



## Ishraq Partners

**C**aritas Egypt is affiliated with the Caritas Internationalis Confederation, comprising 162 Catholic relief, development, and social service organizations working to build a better world, especially for the poor and oppressed, in over 200 countries and territories.

**The Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA)**, headquartered in Washington, DC, is an international nonprofit organization that seeks to empower women at all levels of society to be full partners in development. Founded in 1975, CEDPA supports programs and training in leadership, capacity building, advocacy, governance and civil society, youth participation, and reproductive health.

**The Population Council** is an international, nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that seeks to improve the well-being and reproductive health of current and future generations around the world and to help achieve a humane, equitable, and sustainable balance between people and resources.

**Save the Children** is the world's largest independent organization for children, making a difference to children's lives in over 110 countries. From emergency relief to long-term development, Save the Children helps children to achieve a happy, healthy, and secure childhood. Save the Children secures and protects children's rights—to food, shelter, health care, education, and freedom from violence, abuse and exploitation.

## Executive Summary

In a rapidly globalizing and technologically driven world, adolescents who miss out on basic resources such as education will be left behind. But what happens to young people deprived even of the chance to form friendships with their peers, participate in the activities of their communities, or enjoy the playful aspects of childhood? In rural areas of countries such as Egypt, that group is largely made up of adolescent girls. These girls remain socially isolated within their families, burdened with heavy domestic chores, and at risk for early marriage to a husband chosen by others. It is for such girls that the Ishraq program was initiated in 2001. The story of that pilot program and the changes it has brought about is the subject of this report.

International understanding of how poverty is transmitted recognizes the role of gender-based inequalities. Policies and programs for young girls are improving child survival rates and school attendance. Livelihood opportunities and reproductive health services are now standard tools for reaching women of reproductive age. But the international community has lagged behind in its understanding of adolescence as a pivotal time for girls during which effective programs could make up for childhood deficits and launch young women toward healthy, empowered adulthood.

In Egypt, national investments in education and health services now reach most young children, and the gender gap in primary school enrollment is closing. Laudable efforts to create school places for all children ages seven to ten are making great progress. But they come too late for those adolescent girls who were kept from school by poverty and other obstacles. Most of these girls are concentrated in the poorest villages of Upper Egypt. They face a bleak future that will replicate the poverty and disadvantage of their own families.

### Context

Egypt's population contains the largest cohort of adolescents in the country's history, with more than 13 million boys and girls in their second decade of life. Most will complete at least nine years of schooling as a result of ambitious programs to spread basic education. Despite that progress, however, a sizable proportion of adolescents missed those opportunities entirely. According to the Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey



The Ishraq (“enlightenment”) program in rural Egypt has ambitious goals for adolescent girls: to create safe spaces for girls to learn and play in their communities, to increase their literacy, and to promote positive social norms related to their abilities and life opportunities.

of 2006, 26 percent of girls aged 13–19 in rural Upper Egypt either received no schooling or dropped out after just one to two years. This means that more than 380,000 girls in the region are approaching adulthood without the skills and resources needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

As girls reach adolescence, especially if they are not in school, community norms dictate that they should be closely supervised until a husband can be found. Arranged and early marriages are far more likely for these girls, followed rapidly by successive pregnancies, thus perpetuating the cycle of illiteracy and poverty into the next generation.

### Ishraq's Approach

This stark picture of vulnerability encouraged four long-standing nongovernmental organizations working in Egypt—Caritas, CEDPA (Centre for Development and Population Activities), the Population Council, and Save the Children—to create a multidimensional program for 13–15-year-old out-of-school girls. This segment of Egypt's population has been one of the hardest to reach and is largely underserved by other programs. These four NGO partners established critically important collaborations with two key government agencies: the Ministry of Youth and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood.

The pilot intervention, known locally as Ishraq (“enlightenment”), was launched in 2001 in four rural villages of Al Minya governorate in Upper Egypt, one of Egypt's poorest regions. Ishraq sought

to transform girls' lives by changing gender norms and community perceptions about girls' roles in society while bringing them safely and confidently into the public sphere. Moreover, Ishraq sought to establish girl-friendly spaces in the communities for girls to meet, learn, and play. Through a combination of literacy classes, a life skills program, and sports, Ishraq provided girls with new and valued skills and changed the way girls see themselves. Initially, Ishraq sought to enroll approximately 50 girls per village. However, in response to the considerable interest and growing waiting lists, the program ultimately accommodated 277 girls. Girls met four times a week for 30 months in youth centers or schools, in groups of around 25 girls each. Locally selected and trained female secondary school graduates, known as promoters, served as teachers, role models, and girls' advocates. They were the critical link between girls, their families, and Ishraq.

Ishraq went far beyond one-dimensional programs focusing on education or health. It aimed to develop skills, increase self-confidence, build citizenship and leadership abilities, and raise girls' expectations for the future. Recognizing that participants would benefit far less if the attitudes and behaviors of girls' gatekeepers remain unchanged, Ishraq designed interventions aimed at educating and influencing boys, parents, community leaders, and promoters.

### Ishraq's Key Achievements

Ishraq has made important contributions at the individual, community, and institutional levels and has the potential to benefit other traditional communities in Egypt. At the level of individuals, the program increased literacy levels and knowledge of critical reproductive health issues and transformed gender norms and attitudes. Parallel changes also occurred among governorate and national-level ministry officials, who have become enthusiastic supporters of Ishraq. Selected achievements include the following:

- Ishraq secured safe spaces for girls. Villages dedicated "girls-only" space allowing both current program participants and Ishraq graduates to meet and learn.
- 92 percent of Ishraq participants who took the government literacy exam passed; 68.5 percent of participants who completed the program have entered or re-entered school.
- Ishraq girls expressed a desire to marry at older ages and to have a say in choosing a husband.

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“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*

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- Participants overwhelmingly objected to female genital cutting (FGC) for their future daughters. Only 1 percent of Ishraq graduates believed FGC is necessary, compared to 76 percent of nonparticipants who hold that belief.
- Girls who participated regularly in Ishraq reported higher levels of self-confidence than nonparticipants: 65 percent said they often feel “strong and able to face any problem.”
- Ishraq encourages community and civic involvement: 49 percent of Ishraq participants belong to a local club or association.
- Attitudes of parents and male peers were also altered through programs designed for them. Parents participated in community discussions and adopted increasingly progressive views toward girls' roles, rights, and capacities.

### Expanding Ishraq

As Ishraq begins the process of expansion, the NGO and government partners will pay special attention to 1) lowering the age of entry from 13 to 11 in order to include younger girls, 2) strengthening the skills and capacities of program promoters, 3) streamlining curriculum and program content, 4) engaging parents and community leaders more fully, 5) reinforcing girls' reliable access to nationally guaranteed rights and entitlements, and 6) developing contracts for communities and parents to ensure their commitment to the program.

Ishraq represents a model of collaboration between government, local communities, NGOs, and international agencies, leading to sustainable national partnerships. This partnership structure can act as a model for other development work in the Middle East. Indeed, as the Ishraq program expands and receives increasing national and international recognition, other countries facing similar challenges have begun to examine the Ishraq model.

## Introduction

At the start of the twenty-first century social and technological changes have broadened opportunities for healthier, more productive lives for populations of developing countries. On the other hand, globalization of the economy and the demand for technical skills mean almost certain poverty for those who are not prepared with the skills to enter new job markets. Globalization is increasing the rewards for education and raising the costs of exclusion from schooling. Young adults who missed out on schooling as children will almost certainly repeat the cycle of poverty that kept their families from educating them in the first place. “Education for All” makes good development sense.

As international understanding of poverty deepens, the focus has shifted from purely sectoral interventions in education or job training toward strategies that recognize gender-based inequality and target specific social groups and stages in the life cycle. This approach is based on solid program-based evidence. For instance, investments in girls have far-reaching effects on the future prospects of the next generation. Better-educated girls are likely to marry later, have fewer children, and ensure that their own children have better health and higher educational achievement. For the past decade the development community has sharpened its tools for attacking the “feminization of poverty” through programs to improve girls’ infant survival rates, school-entry rates, and, later on, their health and livelihood opportunities as young married women (Kanafani et al. 2005). There is little doubt that women’s education and ability to earn are crucial to eliminating enduring cycles of poverty.

But that global effort, represented since 2000 by the UN Millennium Development Goals, has been limited by a critical shortcoming. International efforts have not fully recognized the pivotal role of girls’ adolescent experiences in determining future prospects for adult women. While adolescence as a life cycle stage is increasingly noted in the literature



The years of transition from childhood to adulthood ideally bring expanding opportunities, growing self-awareness, and increased knowledge about the world. For girls in rural Egypt, these opportunities often never arrive.

as a key transition, few programs actually translate that concern into measurable life improvements for the most disadvantaged adolescents. And few national budgets allocate significant resources or policy attention to this group (El-Laithy 2001).

### Taking Action to Reach Girls Left Behind

A collaboration involving four nongovernmental organizations with a long history of work in Egypt—Caritas, CEDPA (Centre for Development and Population Activities), the Population Council, and Save the Children—resulted in the design of a program for out-of-school 13–15-year-old girls in rural Upper Egypt that offered them a comprehensive package of learning, skills development, and sports. The partnership emerged in response to the lack of safe spaces in which out-of-school girls could learn, play, and develop the skills and capacities to become active participants in their communities. Known as *Ishraq* (“enlightenment”), the program has sought to educate girls in literacy and basic academic subjects, to help them understand more about their community and their rights, and to introduce them to a more action-oriented world complete with sports and recreational activities.

A distinctive feature of Ishraq is its emphasis on group formation and providing “safe spaces” in which girls can interact. Beyond the specific program components, in designing Ishraq the four NGO partners sought to remove social and institutional barriers that have limited girls’ full participation in society. Because girls are rarely in a position to make decisions about their lives without the explicit approval of parents and the support of community members, aspects of the program were aimed at educating and influencing boys, parents, and community leaders, as well as the young women who would assume leadership and carry out the program.

This report describes the rationale and early outcomes of the program. It concentrates on ways in which ongoing evaluation was used to fine-tune Ishraq during the pilot phase and assesses the impact of the program on the girls themselves, their families, and their communities more broadly. The report provides details of the content and mechanics of the program. Finally, it offers evidence of the program’s impact on girls through analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, as well as insights gained through direct observation of program operations. Specifically, the report examines Ishraq’s efforts to:

- increase girls’ functional literacy and educational aspirations;
- improve knowledge of key health and rights issues;
- increase girls’ life skills, civic engagement, and livelihood skills;
- expand girls’ peer networks;
- provide safe space for girls to learn and play;
- influence attitudes of parents and boys toward girls and their capabilities; and
- improve local and national policymakers’ support for girl-friendly measures and policies.

### **The Setting for Ishraq: Rural Upper Egypt**

Despite major foreign aid transfers and national policy efforts, Egypt faces continuing and sometimes widening disparities between its urban and rural populations in key health, social, and economic indicators. Regional gaps remain in fertility, maternal mortality, female age at marriage, and the rate of decline in harmful traditional practices such as female genital cutting (El-Zanaty and Way 2006).

While some of the gender differentials in basic indicators such as education and employment are decreasing nationwide, progress is much more

rapid among better-educated urban populations. The convergence of regional and gender inequalities is seen most starkly in rural Upper Egypt, located south of Cairo. Even as the government adjusts economic policies to make Egypt more competitive globally, rural girls from Upper Egypt are at greatest risk of falling furthest behind.

Keen awareness of global economic imperatives is driving a national initiative to eradicate illiteracy in Egypt and to secure places in primary school for all children before they reach the age of seven. Those twin goals have mobilized resources for illiterate adults and for children of primary school age, with laudable results. More than 95 percent of children now enter primary school when they reach the appropriate age. An equally ambitious effort targets young adults with basic literacy classes, both in neighborhoods and at workplaces.

But those programs nearly always miss a disadvantaged group caught between childhood and adulthood—adolescent girls. In large numbers, especially in rural areas, they are prevented from attending school at earlier ages by parents’ need for their domestic labor, lack of school fees, and other obstacles. Without the opportunity for continuing education, childhood often ends abruptly for these girls. They are considered ripe for marriage, usually a union arranged by adult family members without girls’ involvement.

### **Targeting Adolescents in Egypt**

In the mid-1990s the Population Council undertook a program to document the status and needs of Egyptian adolescents. The Council was concerned that existing programs were too narrowly conceived, thus unable to effect significant changes in adolescents’ lives. Cycles of illiteracy, poor job prospects, and social isolation can be broken, but doing so requires concerted efforts to reach girls early—with robust programs—before marriage and childbearing intervene.

In 2000, in collaboration with a number of research partners, the Council published results from the first nationally representative survey reporting on the lives of Egyptian youth (El Tawila et al. 1999). It showed that while many young people were receiving more education than their parents and expected better futures, one group, girls in rural Upper Egypt, continued to be disproportionately disadvantaged. These girls faced significant gender gaps in schooling, health, and livelihood



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### Ishraq's objectives were to:

- create safe public spaces for girls;
  - improve girls' functional literacy, recreational opportunities, life skills, health knowledge and attitudes, and mobility and civic participation;
  - positively influence social norms concerning girls' capacities and life opportunities; and
  - improve local and national policymakers' support for girl-friendly measures and policies.
- 

prospects. They were most at risk for early marriage, female genital cutting, and violence within the household. Rural girls worked long hours in the home and in the fields. Parents' fears for their social reputations restricted their mobility and participation within the community.

In addition, studies found a climate in which civic engagement for young people is discouraged and fewer than 5 percent join clubs or nongovernmental organizations. Boys can seek alternative means of expression, socializing, and learning public roles—through sports and by gathering on street corners. Girls' main outlet for nonfamilial interaction is the school. Thus, deprivation of schooling means more than forfeiting a formal education and skills. Out-of-school girls miss out on peer group interaction, exposure to adult role models, and chances to play sports and learn to be social leaders.

Isolated at home and in hundreds of small villages, these girls form a silent and unrepresented group. Yet, their degree of success in making the transition to adulthood under better circumstances than their mothers faced will determine whether or not Upper Egypt overcomes its twin problems of poverty and rapid demographic growth. For that to happen, these girls need to have advocates and opportunities.

What is the scale of the problem? On the basis of projections from Egypt's Demographic and Health Survey, an estimated 25 percent of rural Upper Egyptian girls aged 11–15 were out of school in 2005. Not

only are the numbers large, but most of these girls are scattered over many small and isolated villages and hamlets. An effective strategy to reach them in large numbers requires both local mobilization of communities and a concerted policy shift to make resources and leadership available on a broad scale.

Although uniquely structured, Ishraq is not the only program to target out-of-school children in rural Egypt. For example, in the early 1990s UNICEF and several partners started a "community school" initiative in Upper Egypt. While these schools also admit boys, approximately 70 percent of the students are girls. Schools are accredited and their graduates are able to enter government-run secondary schools. In response to the success of the community schools, the Ministry of Education introduced the "one-room classroom" initiative. Approximately 3,000 of these small schools are located throughout rural Egypt.

Another initiative, led by the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, is the "FGM-free village model." In this case a host of organizations seek to empower small villages to take the lead in abolishing female genital mutilation. Besides advocating the prevention of FGM, this initiative has encouraged community cohesiveness and village volunteerism.

While the general policy environment in Egypt is favorable, there is no clear pathway through which vulnerable girls can gain access to their entitlements—to education, health, and citizenship. The goal of the four Ishraq partners was to help construct the social platform through which girls could achieve these goals.

The Ishraq partners hypothesized that intervening early in girls' lives would be the most effective strategy, before their life courses are charted and at a time when they have the enthusiasm for social change and hold optimistic views about their future. Moreover, progress toward citizenship, education, and agency for young women needs to begin before they become encumbered by adult caregiving roles. The partners sought to determine whether a comprehensive program responding to expressed needs for literacy, basic knowledge, livelihoods, physical mobility, and community engagement would be an effective way to prepare girls for a safe and productive adulthood. To that, they added sports and recreation as a pathway to enhanced self-confidence and well-being. From the outset, then, Ishraq sought to turn the metaphoric concept of "safe spaces" into actual locations where girls could meet and learn.

## Ishraq: A Program for Girls in Socially Conservative Settings

In many cases, programs for adolescents have primarily offered health information, vocational training, after-school clubs, and the like. This approach assumes that certain basic services are already available. Given the constraints faced by girls in traditional Upper Egypt, the Ishraq partners became convinced of the need to provide girls with a wide range of skills and opportunities. They needed to select activities and skills that parents would accept as valid and desirable for their daughters, such as basic literacy, and those that would arm girls with new tools for improving their lives—negotiating skills, problem-solving abilities, and opportunities to practice teamwork and to lead others.

The partners also recognized that interventions aimed solely at girls would have only a minimal effect on the community norms that govern gender behavior and constrain options for girls. In designing the pilot stage of Ishraq, the partner organizations built in a high level of community engagement from the outset. Ishraq staff worked simultaneously with adolescent boys, parents, locally recruited program promoters, and community leaders such as priests and mosque imams, physicians, mayors, and others. Although this step added substantially to initial program costs when compared with more typical programs for adolescents, the partners believed it was the only path to sustained social change.

In conceptualizing Ishraq, the partners postulated that a comprehensive program would be better able to meet the broad needs of girls than one that was narrowly focused. Ishraq simultaneously addressed cognitive development through language, numeracy, and problem solving; physical expression

through games and sports; livelihoods through exposure to working women and skill training; and life skills through discussions about interpersonal relations, gender and other social norms, and health beliefs and behavior.

## Selecting Villages for Ishraq

The four partners selected Al Minya governorate in Upper Egypt as the site for the pilot phase of Ishraq. Despite active programs by a number of development NGOs, Al Minya remains one of the country's poorest governorates. Six villages of roughly matched criteria in Samalut district were chosen, with adolescent girls in four of the sites given the opportunity to participate in Ishraq; the remaining two sites served as control villages. The villages selected were relatively isolated, poor, and lacking in public services. All had low literacy rates and large proportions of out-of-school girls.

Another selection criteria was a scarcity of adolescent services such as secondary schools and vocational training facilities. To test the viability of using public buildings to create safe spaces for girls, the partners chose villages that had at least one public school or youth center in which to house program activities.

Villages ranged in size from about 5,000 residents to nearly 21,000. While these villages share a common heritage of poverty, conservative social customs, and an agricultural economy, there were ethnic, religious, and geographic differences (El-Zanaty and Way 2004). For example, one village is predominately Muslim, while another has a Coptic majority; other villages are more mixed. One of the villages has the distinction of being a "mother village," which confers a degree of administrative and

**TABLE 1: Selected demographic and educational characteristics of Ishraq villages<sup>a</sup>**

Village	Total population in 1996	Percent of females aged 6–11 as a percent of total population	Percent of females aged 12–14 as a percent of total population	Male literacy rate (aged 10+) (%)	Female literacy rate (aged 10+) (%)	Percent of out-of-school girls aged 6–11	Percent of out-of-school girls aged 12–14
1	9,700	6.8	3.2	54.5	14.1	37	66
2	13,900	8.6	4.2	43.3	14.1	42	77
3	8,300	7.5	4.0	43.0	8.9	53	87
4	5,100	7.8	3.5	55.2	26.1	22	53
5	20,800	7.7	3.8	49.5	18.0	23	63
6	8,300	7.8	3.9	49.9	15.2	52	67

<sup>a</sup> All figures based on 100 percent census counts except for percent of out-of-school girls, which is based on a 10 percent sample.

economic prominence. Levels of resources and infrastructure were fairly equal across villages, although one of the villages boasted a more active community development association. Table 1 provides basic demographic and educational characteristics of the study villages. (Detailed descriptions of the villages are contained in Appendix 1.)

## Research Approach and Study Design

The Ishraq partners wanted to learn as much as possible about the girls, their families, and their communities at the beginning of the program and over the 30 months of the program's pilot phase. They used a quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test study design to compare the Ishraq participants with a matched control group of adolescent girls. A household census identified eligible girls ages 13 to 15, who were then surveyed at the beginning (baseline) and end (endline) of the program to measure effects of participation in Ishraq. In addition, the partners used focus group discussions and unstructured interviews to monitor and document the changes occurring among girls, the local program promoters, and families. They also observed classes, training sessions, and parent and community meetings, and accepted invitations to important events in the lives of the girls. These more informal data collection methods were useful in making midpoint changes to the program and alerted the partners to nuances in village dynamics that they would not have been able to observe through more formal study methods. (Discussion of sampling design and data collection appears in Appendix 2.)

The baseline interview was conducted using a structured, individual questionnaire administered before Ishraq was launched in 2001. Sixty-five girls who joined the program at a later stage and who were not included in the baseline survey were interviewed at midpoint, 15 months after the start of the program. The endline survey, administered to all available baseline and midpoint respondents, was conducted in 2004, just after the pilot phase of Ishraq ended. At the endline the goal was to survey all respondents from the baseline survey (574) and those added at the midpoint (65). With a final number of 587 respondents, the endline survey reached 92 percent of girls who had been questioned previously (see Table 2). Of those girls who had responded to earlier questionnaires but were not included in the endline, about one-fifth had moved away, generally after marriage.

**TABLE 2 Number of girls interviewed at various stages of the Ishraq program**

<b>Baseline<sup>a</sup></b>	
Interviewed in program villages prior to program start-up	418
Interviewed in control villages	156
Ishraq participants interviewed at midpoint <sup>b</sup>	65
Total number of girls with baseline data	639
<b>Endline</b>	
Number of girls interviewed	587
<b>Follow-up</b>	
Number of girls with both endline and baseline data	587
Follow-up rate <sup>c</sup>	92%

<sup>a</sup> Response rate not computed for baseline survey.

<sup>b</sup> These girls were interviewed prior to their participation but not prior to Ishraq program start-up. These data serve as baseline data.

<sup>c</sup> The follow-up rate was calculated by dividing the number of girls interviewed at baseline by the number of girls with both baseline and endline data.

To assess the impact of the program, this report limits subsequent quantitative analysis to the 587 girls for whom data are available from at least two points in time and who were interviewed in at least two survey rounds. That number was adequate for most statistical purposes.

Girls from the four villages participating in Ishraq are apportioned into the following categories based on their length of exposure to the program: 1) not participating at all, 2) participating for one year or less, 3) participating for 13–29 months, and 4) participating for the full 30 months. These four program groups are compared to a control group drawn from the two control villages. The breakdown of the five groups used for this analysis is shown in Table 3.

**TABLE 3 Distribution of girls interviewed at baseline/endline by length of exposure to Ishraq**

	<b>Number of girls</b>
Control villages	134
Eligible girls who did not participate	176
Program villages	
Participation for 1 year or less	118
Participation for 13–29 months	51
Participation for full 30 months	108
Total respondents	587



As in any intervention program in which participation is voluntary, the issue of selectivity arises. From the point of view of assessing program impact, the ideal recruitment strategy would have been random assignment to the program from the pool of eligible participants. This was clearly not a feasible strategy in this situation and probably not desirable from a programmatic standpoint. As discussed below, girls were recruited into Ishraq by a combination of public announcements, home visits, meetings with parents, and word of mouth. Girls who volunteered were registered into classes on a first-come, first-served basis. The main worry in analyzing the impact of Ishraq is that households (and girls) who agreed to participate are systematically different from randomly selected households, that these differences are correlated with factors that influence major program outcomes, and that the differences are unobservable to researchers. For instance, if participating households were apt to hold more liberal attitudes about gender roles than randomly selected households, one would expect these girls to be more likely to benefit from the program than randomly selected girls, leading to an upward bias in the measured program outcomes. However, if selection into Ishraq was primarily determined by promoters choosing girls whom they

happened to know and were able to contact (which arguably is the case), then the bias resulting from selectivity would be much smaller.

This report partially addresses this “selectivity bias” by controlling for various observable characteristics in multivariate analyses of program outcomes. However, this still does not address selectivity along dimensions not observed by the researchers. While there are statistical techniques to address such selectivity issues, they are not used in this report because they would be fairly ineffective with such a limited sample size. Readers should therefore keep in mind that the changes observed among Ishraq participants, relative to girls in the control villages or to nonparticipants in program villages, may be biased upward by selectivity. This is particularly relevant when the outcome in question directly affects the incidence and length of a girl’s participation in the program, as is the case, for instance, with early marriage.

One of the key findings of this study is that completing all aspects of the Ishraq program led to important benefits for girls—improving their self-confidence, cognitive abilities, interpersonal skills, and levels of physical mobility. But even an abbreviated exposure to Ishraq often made a positive difference in measurable ways.

## The Girls of Ishraq: A Snapshot of Their Lives

Girls who joined Ishraq spoke of lives that were limited to housework, seasonal work in the fields, watching television or listening to the radio, and waiting for their wedding day—in the hope that marriage would improve their lot in life. Their lack of education and virtual seclusion from public life often meant that family and community members viewed them as inferior. Consequently, these girls had low self-esteem. As one girl remarked, “I wanted to learn—if only to be able to read my own name.” Many described themselves as “ignorant”; most wished for things to be different.

None of the girls who joined Ishraq were currently in school, and 84 percent of them had never attended school. The girls knew little about their community and their rights. Knowledge about reproductive health topics was lacking, and sources of health information were scarce, hidden from girls as being “shameful” until they are married. More than half the girls had already been circumcised, and more than half had received no information on menstruation in advance of their first menstrual period.

Whether an Ishraq participant or not, most out-of-school village girls in Upper Egypt work, performing some sort of farming, cultivation, or animal husbandry. Well over half of the girls worked in the fields, harvesting crops, collecting cotton, cutting clover, or watering crops. An even larger proportion (89 percent) were involved in raising poultry or livestock. Aside from farm and field work, girls might be engaged in selling products such as butter, ghee, or cheese produced by the family; typically they sold these items from a small shop kept in the family’s house. Other tasks included cleaning and cutting vegetables in preparation for industrial processing or for sale in the market, sewing/embroidery, and making sweets. While 80 percent of Ishraq participants were engaged in some form of work, only 28 percent were paid for their labor. Few had control over the in-



In addition to their limited access to schooling, girls in Upper Egypt are at risk for early marriage, female genital cutting, and domestic violence.

come they earned. Interestingly, about one-quarter of the girls had some previous experience with a local rotating savings scheme popular among adult women in rural communities.

As they approach puberty, girls in rural Upper Egyptian villages are restricted by close family supervision, lack of access to peers, and norms severely constraining their mobility. Girls’ physical mobility is curtailed by cultural norms, which determine where it is safe and acceptable to go; not surprisingly, adolescent girls are noticeably absent from public spaces. For the few girls who did engage in sports, they typically did so in the confines of their home.

Restricted mobility deprives girls of many social and cultural opportunities to become self-confident and productive members of the community. Ishraq participants were hindered by lack of awareness of their civil and legal rights and lack of a sense of entitlement. Most girls had no idea how community affairs were handled; political channels and processes were inaccessible to them. Most girls had no form of public identity and they did not expect to be active outside their homes and families.

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“We’re talking about a forgotten class...that has been ignored in education, health, and everything else.”

—father of four, bakery inspector who devotes time to community projects

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It was clear that these girls had missed out on the opportunities that are beginning to emerge for their counterparts in other communities in Egypt. Clubs, community groups, day trips, and other public activities are often organized through schools, meaning that only those who are enrolled can benefit. Despite gains elsewhere in the country, these rural girls were falling further behind. Without

exposure to learning, skill-building, and opportunities to meet with peers and adults who could serve as role models, they have little chance of escaping the poverty of their parents’ generation. And because early marriage will make many of them mothers themselves in the near future, they are at risk of transmitting poverty and disadvantage to the next generation as well. Within this context, Ishraq sought to revise the terms of rural girls’ adolescence and their prospects for the future.

The following pages document the story of a seemingly unremarkable group of girls and their remarkable accomplishments. What began as a modest effort to improve the skills and aspirations of girls in rural Egypt has resulted in the transformation of girls’ sense of themselves, their capabilities, and their future prospects. At the same time, notable changes have also occurred in community attitudes about the value of girls and their role in society.

## Building a Supportive Structure and Delivering a Comprehensive Program to Vulnerable Girls

In order to be successful in creating a program for rural girls, Ishraq needed to build a sponsoring structure and social platform that would support girls and enable them and other members of their communities to embark on social change. The Ishraq partners recognized that this would require forging relationships with organizations active in the community and engaging the support of the communities hosting the Ishraq program. It meant developing human and institutional capacities and identifying talented local residents to lead the effort.

The challenge was to change many of the prevailing attitudes toward girls. Ishraq's underlying rationale was based on the notion that each girl has the potential to be a positive actor in her community. Unfortunately, this premise stood in direct contrast to the perspective held by many girls, who often saw themselves as inferior and ignorant. Communities, too, viewed girls as a source of potential problems who should be "protected" until marriage. Changing these attitudes proved a far greater challenge, requiring focused efforts directed toward girls' gatekeepers. Educating and influencing adolescent boys, parents, community leaders, and young women leaders was essential for successful implementation and was key to the broader goal of transforming community norms.

The concept of offering safe spaces for girls was a prominent element of Ishraq's approach. The idea was that creating safe spaces is the first step in expanding the role of young women in the public sphere. Thus, Ishraq provided girls with the space to learn and play, while developing the confidence and skills needed to participate more fully in society. The location for program activities became a key consideration. During the pilot phase, program activities in two villages were conducted in youth centers, while public schools hosted activities in the other two villages.



Ishraq recruits young female secondary-school graduates from the community and trains them to be program leaders, known as promoters. Promoters serve as teachers, role models, girls' advocates, and providers of moral support. They become the critical link between girls, their families, and the Ishraq resource team.

### Putting the Ishraq Program Together

Identifying the human and institutional resources to develop the community structure through which this novel program could be introduced was the first task. Partnerships among the four key NGOs—Caritas, CEDPA, the Population Council, and Save the Children—were created, and steering committees and working groups were established with representatives from each of the organizations. In addition, links were forged with key government agencies, notably the Ministry of Youth and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood.

All four NGOs contributed staff and resources to various aspects of the Ishraq program, from conceptualization to implementation and evaluation. Caritas and CEDPA had highly relevant, progressive curricula that could be adapted and streamlined for local use. The Population Council carried out research and evaluation. Save the Children had the expertise and capacity to fulfill the critical role of community mobilization and program implementation.

With the program concept established, the partners began grappling with critical operational

questions. Where would the program be based, and what institutional obstacles would arise along the way? Who would deliver the program and what challenges would they face? How could the various curricula be adapted and streamlined to deliver a course content that was tailored to the needs of the intended recipients? How difficult would it be to recruit girls into such a groundbreaking program? How would parents and community members respond?

### **Program Promoters: Local Women Lead the Effort**

As important as the task of identifying institutional partners was the selection of women to act as intermediaries between the Ishraq girls and other stakeholders within the community. This group, known locally as promoters, would play a crucial role in the presentation of Ishraq. It was clear that the partners would have to choose and train young women from a background similar to that of program participants, as they would need to be able to win girls' confidence and trust. The promoters would also need to navigate and negotiate within the strict patriarchal setting of the villages and help the girls gain access to public spaces in order to participate in program activities. This presented a conundrum: where to find female leaders in an environment that lacks conspicuous female leadership.

Despite the restricted lives led by most girls in these rural villages, some young women, often from better-off families, have taken advantage of educational and work opportunities. These were the young women the Ishraq partners chose to take the role of promoters: women who had completed high school or, in some cases, higher education, but whose lives and experience were grounded in village custom. In addition, they sought young women who wanted to work with younger girls, could relate to the challenges these girls face, and were interested in a role that would require engagement in community affairs. The partners were able to recruit and hire promoters through the "word-of-mouth" approach, assembling a group of 24 young women aged 17–25 to act as mentors to the Ishraq girls and to serve as the link between girls, their families, and the program. Promoters were remunerated for their work.

The promoters were trained before they took up their roles, receiving a total of 30 days of train-

ing over the course of several months. They were readied for their interaction with both the girls and members of the community. For their work with the girls, promoters received intensive training in the content of the Ishraq curricula and on different teaching formats and techniques. In addition, they were trained to impart information and skills to Ishraq participants and to convey messages on health, rights, the environment, and civic responsibility, and to help develop other skills, such as negotiation and teamwork. For their interaction with the community, promoters received training in outreach, advocacy, communication, and networking strategies. Following training, each promoter was assigned to a group of girls from her own community who met several times a week. They became the girls' allies and advocates and their highly respected "big sisters."

Throughout the program, promoters gained experience in performing public roles by making home visits, organizing and speaking at community meetings, and bringing public services to girls in their communities. Many have matured from being "just a girl from the village" to becoming respected role models in the eyes of both the girls and other community members. Over the course of the program, promoters took on greater responsibility and sought an expanded role in selecting and training future promoters, planning activities with village committees and the board of directors of youth clubs, and sharing what they learned in the implementation of the pilot phase. Some promoters spoke about how Ishraq affected them as individuals while others spoke of the influence it had on their whole families.

*Now I have a say in my family. My brothers are happy with my work and I have no problems. My neighbors and the village people know me now.*

*Ishraq affected us personally.... We gained self-confidence, learned how to speak with families regarding difficult or controversial issues, learned important information through the New Horizons and health programs, gained skills in how to manage and share this new information, and how to work with different types of people. Now we are more able to teach the girls, organize events, discuss issues with the girls' families, and raise important concerns with influential members in our communities.*



Many former promoters have assumed more visible roles in their communities. Their presence is now felt as board members of youth clubs and community development associations. Some have established women's associations, joined political groups, accepted local leadership positions, and lobbied successfully to increase the access of girls and women to local youth centers. Such civic development activities represent a notable training ground for effective citizenship, particularly in settings where political channels and processes are perceived as remote and inaccessible for girls and women. Ishraq clearly helped create a group of young women leaders able to participate effectively in local politics and to act as role models for others.

### Establishing Village Committees

The next task was to create village committees. Committee members represented a broad range of actors, including youth leaders, women leaders, popular leaders (from local councils), headmasters, youth club directors, board members of community development associations, religious leaders, health center doctors, as well as family representatives, Ishraq participants, and at least one promoter. The village committee's role was primarily that of facilitation and problem-solving. For example, committees assisted in the procurement of birth certificates and health identification cards, played a supportive role during meetings with parents, and intervened to solve problems as they arose. Such intervention was critical, especially early on when some families refused to allow their eligible daughters to join Ishraq. Throughout the program, committee members highlighted the dilemmas they faced in trying to transform traditional perceptions of development from service-based to "collaborative community action."

### Recruiting Girls to the Program: A Family Affair

Recruiting girls to join Ishraq was a family affair. It required not only sparking the interest of girls, but also convincing parents of the program's worth. The Ishraq partners adopted four principal methods in recruitment: word of mouth, public announcements, parents' meetings, and home visits by promoters. A number of parents' meetings were held to discuss the program's concept and goals. Initially,

parents did not understand terms such as life skills and reproductive health. The sports component was a concern for many parents, particularly fathers. Were sports harmful to girls? Would playing sports damage their reputations? Parents and village leaders wanted clear information from a source they could trust. The partners responded by hosting community meetings with locally trusted physicians, religious leaders, and other experts on these issues. Parents' and community meetings continued throughout the program to maintain community awareness and provide a forum for discussion.

One of the most effective recruitment strategies was the promoters' home visits. Promoters met with families of eligible girls to describe the program—what was expected from girls and their families and the valuable opportunity it represented for their daughters. Because of Ishraq's novelty and the community's entrenched social norms, more than one home visit often was needed to secure a girl's participation. By understanding more about who the promoters were and gaining confidence and trust in them, parents began to feel increasingly comfortable with the program.

### The Ishraq Program: Literacy, Sports, Life Skills, Livelihoods

Ishraq's goal was to develop girls' skills, increase self-confidence, build citizenship and leadership abilities, and raise expectations for the future. The main curriculum components—literacy, sports, life skills, and livelihoods—speak most directly to this goal. Beyond the curriculum itself, the youth centers and public schools where program activities took place provided safe spaces for the Ishraq girls. A distinctive feature of Ishraq was its emphasis on group formation, especially on the persistence of the groups for a period of many months over the life of the pilot program. This helped girls build friendships, gain confidence, enhance social networks, and gain a sense of solidarity with other girls in the group.

To maximize the benefits derived from regular interaction with peers, the program was designed to be intensive. Girls met for three hours per day, four days per week. Both the Caritas and CEDPA curricula were taught in a classroom setting, while the sports component was carried out in an enclosed playing field. The timing of meetings was based on the girls' schedules.

The following sections briefly describe the main program components and indicate how they were linked to Ishraq's goals.

### *Literacy*

Caritas's *Learn to Be Free* curriculum is one of the most successful literacy courses in Egypt. Based on principles of Paulo Freire's pedagogy, it relies on active dialogue between teacher (promoter) and learner. Promoters introduce topics using audio-visual aids designed to stimulate a discussion in which students explore a topic, define problems, pose solutions, and learn to spell and write related words. This method promotes a participatory classroom approach that emphasizes the right to express opinions and the importance of respecting the opinions of others. *Learn to Be Free* challenged Ishraq girls to be mentally and physically engaged in ways that were unfamiliar to them in their daily lives.

*Learn to Be Free* classes were held twice a week, with a core curriculum dedicated to Arabic and mathematics. Students were also provided with a book called *Kitab al Thaqafa el Amma*, or the book of general knowledge. With modest financial contributions, classes were furnished with small libraries of 50–100 books.

A critical element of the literacy component was to promote girls' entry or re-entry into the formal education system. A number of key steps were involved. First, the curriculum would need to impart information commensurate with the formal education system, and girls had to be able to take advantage of their right to sit for the official entrance exam. The Ishraq program sought to ensure that girls who completed both phases of the *Learn to Be Free* literacy training were eligible to take the official Ministry of Education examination, known as the General Authority of Literacy and Adult Education. This required negotiation with bureaucracies at community and government levels.

Promoters worked hard to prepare girls for this critical exam, whose significance was well understood by the community. Girls who passed the exam were eligible to enter the formal education system as long as they were younger than 18 years of age. Once a girl is over age 18, regardless of circumstances and academic preparation, she is no longer eligible to enter school.

### *CEDPA's New Horizons*

CEDPA's *New Horizons* curriculum was chosen because of its innovative learning sessions, designed to raise girls' awareness of self, family, health, and social issues (CEDPA 2004a, 2004b). *New Horizons* was the first curriculum in Egypt to present and demystify reproductive health information and basic life skills to young women. The program is intended to raise self-confidence and empower girls and young women to make informed choices by increasing knowledge and building the skills required to apply that knowledge to real-life situations. In addition, *New Horizons* added a novel and potent word to girls' vocabulary: rights.

The curriculum, designed for use with both literate and illiterate girls, is contained in two manuals. The first covers life skills such as communication, negotiation, decisionmaking, and critical thinking. The second is dedicated to reproductive health topics such as gender-based violence, marriage, pregnancy, contraception, and sexual health. Given the sensitive nature of its contents, the material was separated in this manner to satisfy communities that preferred not to offer the reproductive health portion of the curriculum to younger girls; permission of community members was secured before the material was taught. Girls attended two sessions of *New Horizons* weekly, each session lasting 90 minutes.

Information was conveyed through discussion and a variety of audio-visual materials developed specifically for the Egyptian context. Each session included the introduction of a topic through poetry, song, drama, or related activity; a review of group knowledge; discussion of key points covered in a poster; a wrap-up assessment to verify assimilation of main messages; and a follow-up activity in class or at home. *New Horizons* has become one of the most important nonformal education programs serving girls and young women in Upper and Lower Egypt. It is the only nationwide program of its kind and has been adopted by over 230 Egyptian NGOs.

### *Sports and Physical Activity*

Unlike literacy programs or other life skills programs, Ishraq's recreational sports component was an unprecedented intervention, with no comparable initiative in Egypt to use as a blueprint. Introducing the concept of sports for adolescent girls in conservative settings has been a major chal-

lenge. Ishraq would not have been able to introduce sports in these communities without securing the understanding and support of parents, male siblings, and community representatives.

Ishraq's aim was to increase girls' participation in sports and help them to develop healthy values and attitudes. Besides providing recreational opportunities for rural girls, the Population Council developed a sports curriculum designed to ensure that participants have fun in a safe and activity-based environment, nurture feelings of self-worth and self-confidence, acquire skills in a range of recreational activities, learn information and attitudes to help them live safer lives, and make lasting friendships (Zibani 2004).

The sports activities ran for 13 months, twice a week, with each session lasting 90 minutes. The Council's sports program began with a three-month phase that used traditional games to introduce girls to sports and their physical benefits. This was followed by ten months spent learning table tennis and one additional team sport (volleyball, basketball, or handball).

Because the sports component was new, the Ishraq partners hypothesized that the best candidates for teaching sports would be university graduates in physical education; however, this arrangement proved to be counter-productive in many respects. The curriculum developed for team sports was too ambitious to succeed among novices. The university graduates proved to be ill-prepared to work in villages, both in terms of their attitude toward promoters and participants and in terms of their standards and levels of expectation. Thus, Ishraq reached out to residents and promoters to conduct the sports program.

While not part of the initial sports activities, table tennis emerged as an especially popular and practical sport for this setting. In collaboration with the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) and its local Egyptian affiliate, Ishraq introduced table tennis using ITTF's international program "Breaking down barriers with table tennis balls." Table tennis is relatively easy and inexpensive to play and has been favorably received by girls and parents.

### Home Skills and Livelihoods

Participants expressed an interest in a livelihoods program, and Ishraq added training that included both home and vocational skills. Because many girls wanted to learn basic home skills—often in

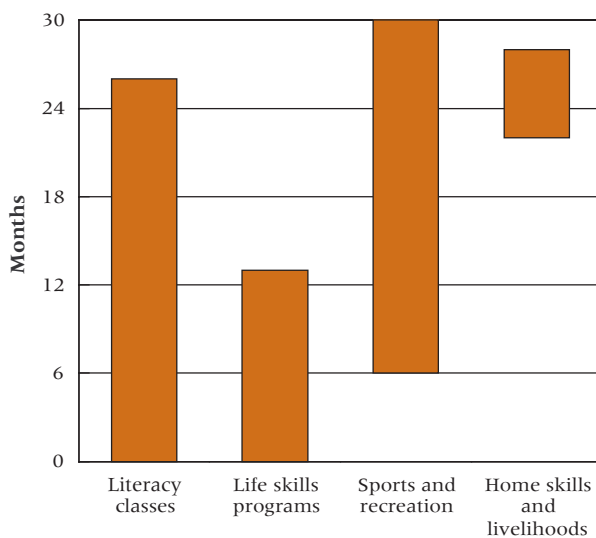
preparation for their future roles as mother and homemaker—Ishraq promoters often took it upon themselves to teach skills such as making cheese and jam, sewing, and needle work.

In addition to these domestic skills, Ishraq partners identified three vocations of particular interest to girls and their families. 1) Seven girls completed an 80-hour course in electrical appliance management and repair. This training was conducted at the village youth center. 2) Hairdressing was the most popular of the vocational skills offered. Fifty girls from four villages completed at least 48 hours of training, which took place either at school or at one of the local hair salons. 3) Thirty girls from four villages completed training in sweets production, and local businesses offered them apprenticeships.

### An Ishraq Chronology: Aligning Program Components

Ishraq was designed with 30 months of program content. Figure 1 provides a snapshot of the basic elements of the program, their length, and their beginning and end points. The sports component began approximately six months after program initiation and remained a continuous part of Ishraq thereafter. Caritas's *Learn to Be Free* literacy component lasted approximately 24 months. *Learn to Be Free* was the most intensive component because girls needed to reach a certain level of proficiency

**FIGURE 1 Timeline of the basic components of the Ishraq program**





in order to sit for the official government exam. CEDPA's *New Horizons* life skills component lasted about 12 months and was intended to complement Caritas's literacy component. Finally, a livelihoods component was introduced toward the end of the pilot program. The home skills and vocational training component, while less structured than the others, was offered to selected girls, some of whom made great strides in learning a vocational skill while others learned basic home skills.

### Developing Self-Confidence: Sports and Play Help Girls Shape a New Image

The sports component brought an aspect of fun to the Ishraq program. For the first time girls began to enjoy the sheer pleasure of movement, especially important in settings where mobility is curtailed. Sports and physical activity help girls develop a sense of pride in their bodies, another vital but often overlooked issue. More than half of participating girls said that without sports they would not have enjoyed the classroom activities as much.

Introducing sports for adolescent girls in traditional, rural communities of Egypt was an unprecedented challenge. Promoters grappled with concerns about modesty and hygiene, trying to normalize these issues for girls and helping them develop acceptance of their bodies. Girls often came to the youth center directly from the fields or their homes wearing traditional dress, sometimes with pants underneath. Ishraq promoters identified the need for changing-rooms at the youth centers. After months of testing and negotiating, girls donned track suits and sneakers for a few hours each week to play with their peers and learn new sports and games.

### Securing Identity Cards and Access to Health Insurance

The literacy curriculum included a critical topic called "Papers for Life," which familiarizes participants with key documents, including birth certificates, marriage certificates, identification cards, electricity bills, and bank checks. When Ishraq started, approximately half the participants did not have birth certificates. This topic was initially introduced solely for discussion, but the Ishraq program later helped participants obtain national identity

cards, a critical first step toward citizenship. All Egyptians are entitled to identity cards, which are necessary for a wide range of political and official activities such as voting and holding a bank account. A combination of village committees, promoters, and other Ishraq staff were involved in obtaining cards for girls. The personal power conferred by having public identification is illustrated by one Ishraq girl's story.

*I was traveling with my father to Assiut. It was my first big trip outside of Minya with him. I was nervous and excited. There was a security check on the train and they asked my father who I was. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my new identification card. The officer took it, looked at it and then returned it to me and said: "That's great. You are smart—it is important that you have this identification card." I felt so happy and proud inside—I felt I was someone, I counted.*

Ishraq participants, like all out-of-school children, have no health insurance, which severely compromises their access to health services. Recognizing that this is a policy which government officials are unlikely to revise in the near future, promoters approached the village committees and presented the situation to them. The village committees studied the different options and concluded that the best solution was a local one that would ensure girls' rights and access to health centers. Because the Ishraq village committees included physicians posted at health centers as well as youth club directors and school representatives, a solution was worked out among them. Representatives of youth clubs and schools agreed to issue an Ishraq-based health identification card that would be recognized by providers at local health centers. Efforts to make this arrangement permanent are being discussed. This represents a first step in preparing girls to seek and access health services, thereby paving the way for appropriate use of services and establishing good health-seeking behavior. The Ishraq partners expect that this initial step will yield future dividends.

### Reconsidering Program Participation and Reasons for Dropout

Ishraq has opened a door for many girls. This opening, particularly in traditional settings, can be viewed

as the first step in the process of social change. An ongoing requirement is to support those girls who walk through that door, while at the same time understanding more about the girls who do not and cannot. One contribution of Ishraq may be to chal-

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“In Ishraq, I learned how to do things that were different from what I had done all my life.”  
—*Ishraq participant*

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lenge assumptions about how to involve girls in similar programs and to reconsider definitions of enrollment, participation, and attrition.

It is noteworthy that during the recruitment process, more girls wished to join Ishraq than the program could accommodate, so a waiting list was established. The Ishraq partners viewed this as a critical indicator of interest. Some of the girls on the waiting list replaced others who dropped out of the program at an early stage. The partners also recognized that some girls may fail to attend Ishraq classes for a number of sessions (during the harvest season or during the illness of a family member, for example) and then resume. This suggests that programs targeting such girls must conceive of partici-

pation in flexible terms to accommodate the circumstances of all would-be participants.

When considering the issue of dropping out, it is necessary to understand when girls left the program and why. Out of 277 program participants, 108 girls completed the full 30-month program; the remaining 169 had varying levels of participation. The highest number of dropouts (83) occurred within the first six months of the program, representing approximately 49 percent of all dropouts. Toward the end of the program, on the other hand, only 11 girls left, representing around 6.5 percent of all dropouts. This finding suggests that during the early stages of Ishraq, participants and their parents begin to understand what participation requires and must make decisions about their level of commitment. It also suggests that future recruitment strategy must strike a balance between a mass appeal to rapidly enroll girls into the program and a more targeted approach that seeks to identify girls and families who are able and willing to make a long-term commitment.

As girls in conservative settings approach puberty, societal pressures increase and conservative customs are enforced. When girls reached what was considered a marriageable age (around 14 or 15), more of them began leaving the program. The three principal reasons for dropout from Ishraq were: marriage; work—the girl’s labor was needed to contribute to family income and/or subsistence; and parents’ worries about the public perception of the program.

## Changing the Attitudes of Girls' Gatekeepers: Parents, Boys, and Community Leaders

In the tightly controlled lives of adolescent girls in rural Upper Egypt, a number of “gatekeepers” play critical roles. It was not enough to convince girls that Ishraq is beneficial: Ishraq’s partners also had to address the concerns of several groups of gatekeepers. Thus, engaging parents, brothers, and community leaders became an essential element of the program strategy. This was necessary in the short term simply to enable girls to participate and in the medium term to permit them to remain in Ishraq. But more than this, the Ishraq partners wanted to achieve acceptance among these gatekeepers of the intrinsic value of the program. The ultimate goal, of course, was to exert a long-term positive influence on the social norms concerning girls’ life opportunities.

### Bringing Boys into the Picture

The contradictions of social change are particularly acute among adolescent males, who are grappling with received wisdom from elders, personal insecurities of adolescence, and a growing awareness that gender relations are changing. Ishraq took account of these insights in its effort to engage boys in discussion about rights and responsibilities.

Adolescent boys, particularly the brothers of adolescent girls, are crucial actors in helping to shape girls’ lives. Once girls reach puberty, brothers often monitor their behavior, protecting them from impropriety or damaging interactions. But boys also create an unsafe atmosphere in public spaces by teasing, flirting with, or harassing girls. Both sorts of behavior constrain girls’ mobility and limit their opportunities to develop.

The primary goal of the program directed at boys was to encourage girls’ brothers and other male relatives to think and act in a more gender-equitable manner. The partners introduced CEDPA’s



**Ishraq initiates a process of change among girls while also gaining the support of brothers, fathers, mothers, and community leaders.**

*New Visions* “life skills” program for adolescent boys into Ishraq as part of CEDPA’s wider field testing of the program in other regions of Egypt.

Ishraq selected two male facilitators between ages 23 and 25 in each program village to receive training, recruit participants, and lead learning groups. Their training included broad topics such as communication skills, creative-thinking skills, values and human relations, gender issues, and skills in planning for the future.

CEDPA developed the *New Visions* curriculum to complement its *New Horizons* program for girls and tested it in 2002. The curriculum contains 19 topics, divided into 64 sessions of approximately 1½ to 2 hours. The topics include gender equity, partnership with women, civil and human rights, and responsibility to self, family, and community. The curriculum was offered to boys in Ishraq villages, especially brothers of participants. Boys in the *New Visions* program ranged in age from 13 to 17. Each class of 20–25 boys met four times a week for six months; 120 boys successfully completed the program.

### Listening to Parents’ Concerns and Developing Solutions

Parents are central to determining the future prospects of their daughters, just as they have guided their past development. We can assume that it

was parents who made the initial decision as to whether their children would receive an education or would drop out of school at an early age. And parental permission was required for girls to participate in the Ishraq program. Parents are concerned about the reputations and marriage prospects of their daughters. The centrality of marriage in these communities can lead to decisions to accept a suitor even if the girl is below the legal marriage age of 16. Knowing that a daughter will marry and leave the household may discourage investment in young girls; thus it was essential to present parents with an alternative vision of the needs and potential of adolescent girls who have not had an opportunity for education.

Understanding, anticipating, and responding to parents' concerns about their daughters' reputation were critical. Location and time of day for program activities were major points of negotiation with parents. Youth centers, the proposed program sites, were considered places exclusively for boys.

By engaging parents in discussion and workshops at the youth centers, eventually parents, community leaders, and youth center staff began to see that "the youth center belongs to the village"—that everyone has the right to use it. Despite initial concerns, many parents' attitudes changed over time. Parents now speak positively about Ishraq's contribution to girls' education, which is increasingly recognized as an important factor in the marriage market.

*In the beginning people used to say it was a useless program. Now girls go for medical check-ups and are careful about their health. . . . They went to places they have never been to before; even we have not been to these places before! They examine them to see if they have eye problems, or a certain deficiency or bilharziasis.*

Parents and families are trying to adapt to the changing social and economic conditions that surround them. Few programs for parents exist, and even fewer that focus specifically on the parents of adolescents. Ishraq attempted to bridge that gap. The parents' program began with ad hoc meetings in Ishraq's second year. The purpose of the meetings was to maintain girls' enrollment in Ishraq by discussing topics affecting attendance, such as the importance of girls' education, reproductive health, and elimination of female genital cutting (FGC). Parents' participation in these meetings was high,

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“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*

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with about 70 to 80 percent of girls having at least one family member attending. Mothers were more likely than fathers to attend, and the attendance of mothers increased in each succeeding meeting. Reports of mothers wanting to participate in Ishraq themselves led Ishraq's partners to suggest a parallel program for mothers using the well-known *Arab Women Speak Out* curriculum.

One parents' meeting focused on female genital cutting. Mothers of participating girls, midwives, physicians, local leaders, religious leaders, and girls themselves participated in this discussion. Physicians explained FGC—the process, the resulting problems, and the overall effects on girls' lives. Religious leaders stipulated that neither the Koran nor the Bible supports FGC. Both girls who had undergone genital cutting and those who had not presented their experiences to the group. The meeting created a sense of purpose among religious leaders and community members for discussing and solving issues facing adolescent girls.

The importance of education was discussed in meetings attended by around 60 parents and by local leaders in each of the four program villages. These meetings gave girls an opportunity to discuss the changes that occurred—both in reading and writing and in how they think, solve problems, plan their lives, and manage their health.

One girl recalled how she became responsible for giving her father his medications on time. She was now able to read the expiration date on products the family uses, a new and greatly valued skill for the family. One of the parents said that her daughter can now read and described how she helps her brothers in primary school with their lessons.

## Safe Space Becomes a Real Place for Girls

The Ishraq program established safe spaces within the public arena where girls could meet and learn. It instituted a “code of practice”—beginning with the staff carrying out Ishraq and extending to the communities—which required that girls be treated with respect and dignity. The application of this code of practice at the youth centers, combined with measures to assure parents that girls were safe in those locations, has begun to effectively transform youth centers into safe spaces.

This transformation is being accomplished by reshaping the way in which youth programs are conceptualized, giving more explicit attention to the rights and needs of girls and young women. Dedi-

cating specific days and times for girls’ activities at the youth center is one example. Ishraq established cooperative agreements with board members of youth centers (and, in villages without a youth center, with staff of public schools) to ensure strong community support and guarantee that board members take responsibility for the planning and implementation of activities with adolescents.

Because the social barriers that young girls in Upper Egypt face in accessing youth centers are even greater than those in gaining access to schools, the success of Ishraq in this respect is all the more notable. By involving youth centers as sites for its programs, Ishraq builds local capacity, provides girl-friendly services, and supports a sustainable model for future expansion on a national scale.



## Impact of the Ishraq Program on Girls: Selected Findings

Focus group discussions with girls who participated in Ishraq revealed the widespread appeal of the program. Girls' enthusiasm for Ishraq and the confidence and clarity with which they were able to discuss aspects of the program demonstrate the success Ishraq has had in influencing the lives of girls and their families.

Beyond these qualitative assessments, Ishraq has been evaluated through a longitudinal survey of out-of-school adolescent girls aged 13–15 in the four program villages and in an additional two control villages. The survey, using a pre-test/post-test design, measured knowledge of key health and rights issues, gender role attitudes, literacy and educational aspirations, friends and peer networks, work and livelihood skills, harassment of girls and constraints on their mobility, sports participation, and key issues related to marriage. By comparing end-of-program responses of the participants and control respondents with their baseline responses, readers can discern the degree of change attributable to participation in Ishraq.

The baseline survey interviewed 574 girls: 418 in the program villages and 156 in the control villages. The baseline survey was conducted in late spring 2001, before the launch of the program, among all girls who met the eligibility criteria (between ages 13 and 15 and not in school). Although the baseline survey was intended to include all eligible girls, 65 girls who later participated in the program were missed. When these girls joined the program later, Ishraq collected baseline information from most of them at the midpoint of the program. The endline survey was conducted at the end of the program, approximately 30 months after the initiation of Ishraq activities. It covered 587 girls: 453 in Ishraq villages and 134 in control villages. The subsequent analysis is restricted to girls who were interviewed in both rounds of the survey.



Ishraq aims to improve the lives of rural out-of-school girls by providing them with safe meeting places and a second chance for education. Ninety-two percent of Ishraq participants who took the government literacy exam passed.

Because only 50 girls in each village were recruited to participate in the program, 176 eligible girls in the four Ishraq villages did not participate. These girls serve as an additional comparison group that can indicate the indirect benefits that accrue to nonparticipants simply by living in the same village as participants. Moreover, not all girls who participated in Ishraq were exposed to it to the same extent. Some girls dropped out before Ishraq was completed and some, as mentioned earlier, joined late. To determine the impact of this partial participation, the sample of program participants (277 cases in all) was subdivided into an additional three categories based on the length of their participation: one year or less (118 cases), 13 to 29 months (51 cases), and full participation for 30 months (108 cases).

The analysis that follows compares the changes observed from baseline to endline between the control group and the four program groups, including those in the program villages who did not participate in Ishraq at all. It also compares the changes from baseline to endline between the nonparticipants in program villages and the three remaining groups in these villages. The discussion highlights findings from a select group of key areas.

## Literacy, Education, and Practical Skills: Improvement Across the Board

At baseline, only 17 percent of girls in both control and Ishraq villages had attended formal school at some point in the past. On the other hand, 73 percent had previously attended a literacy program. Few notable differences were found among the various comparison groups at baseline in their exposure to either formal education or literacy classes.

Both the baseline and endline surveys asked about a number of basic academic skills, including: 1) writing one's own name; 2) solving a simple math problem involving the computation of change from a purchase; 3) reading a simple paragraph of a few lines. By the endline survey, these basic abilities had improved among all groups of girls. However, the improvements for girls in control villages and for nonparticipants in program villages were small. Full-term participants consistently showed the greatest increase in these academic skills.

Multivariate techniques were used to assess whether the disproportionate increase in skills among participants could be attributed to the Ishraq program or was, instead, the result of higher baseline skills or was perhaps fostered by other background factors. Results confirm that participation in Ishraq had a significant net impact on improving academic skills such as writing one's name, solving a math problem, and reading a simple paragraph. Controlling for baseline knowledge and such background characteristics as age, religion, degree of exposure to the program, and family socioeconomic status, the girls who participated in Ishraq but dropped out early performed better than either nonparticipants or those in the control villages, and full-term participants fared best of all. (See Appendix 3.)

The goal of Ishraq went beyond simply providing girls with basic literacy skills. Another central objective was to give participants the opportunity to return to formal education and enter the public school system in the first year of the preparatory (middle school) level. Girls who remained in Ishraq for the full 30 months had a remarkable degree of success—68.5 percent were enrolled in formal schooling by the endline survey. As shown in Table 4, the proportion who successfully enrolled in middle school varies with the extent of participation in Ishraq. Girls in control villages had no chance of enrolling, and nonparticipants in program villages had a very small chance, possibly reflecting the demonstration

**TABLE 4** Percent of girls who had entered middle school by the end of the program, by level of participation in Ishraq

Level of participation	Percent	(N)
Control villages	0.0	(134)
Program villages		
Nonparticipants	5.1	(176)
12 months or less	6.8	(118)
13–29 months	23.5	(51)
Full participation	68.5	(108)

effect from Ishraq participants. The higher probability of enrolling in middle school for Ishraq participants was statistically significant, and remained strongly significant when background characteristics were controlled for in multivariate analysis.

The main reasons for nonenrollment reported by girls who completed the program but did not enroll in middle school were opposition by their parents or, in the case of those who married, the husband's refusal, the unavailability of a middle school in the village, and being older than age 18, the maximum age for enrolling in middle school.

Ishraq was designed to teach girls practical skills, such as making cheese, yogurt, butter, and jam, and sewing and needle work. At baseline, Ishraq participants were more likely than nonparticipants to have higher levels of such skills, but they were also much more likely to learn new skills by the time of the endline survey. Among Ishraq participants who learned new skills, a majority (50–70 percent) reported learning various skills from the Ishraq promoters.

## High Levels of Work among Girls

Girls in all six villages have consistently reported very high levels of labor force work. In the baseline survey 80 percent of the out-of-school girls were currently working, with 28 percent reporting that they earned money from their work. These figures are much higher than comparable results from the national Egyptian Labor Market Survey conducted in 1998. This is probably the result of the way questions were asked in both surveys and the clear seasonality in labor force work for girls of this age in Upper Egypt (see Langsten and Salem 2006). After investigating the inconsistencies between the two studies, the questions used to measure work in the midpoint and endline surveys were modified. The new questions provided more detailed infor-

mation on what types of work the girls do and how they are paid. The modified questions resulted in even higher levels of work reported. Ninety-seven percent of all girls who participated in the endline survey reported working in the previous month. Most of the work is related to agriculture and farm animals. About 68 percent of in-school girls and 74 percent of out-of-school girls have worked in the fields (see Table 5).

Because of the generally high levels of labor force work, there is little scope for differences by level of participation in Ishraq, but the results clearly suggest that participation did not interfere with girls' work. During harvest season, work becomes virtually universal for these girls, and hours of work increase substantially, a fact that has to be taken into account when setting schedules for educational programs.

Among those who work, girls in control villages, on average, worked more hours in the week prior to the interview, but full-term participants in Ishraq were not far behind. Full-term participants were also the most likely to be paid for their work, and on average earned the most money.

Among girls who had participated in Ishraq (including dropouts), those who were enrolled in middle school at the time of the endline survey were at least as likely to be working as those girls who were out of school. However, those in school who work were likely to work fewer hours on average, with 78 percent of those in school working 1 to 4 hours per day compared to 70 percent for those not in school. This result suggests that work is not necessarily incompatible with studying if the hours worked per day are fairly low. Because only a small percentage of nonparticipants reported going back to school, similar analysis on labor force work and schooling status was not performed for this category of respondents.

**TABLE 5 Percent of full-term Ishraq participants reporting having done labor force work in the past four weeks, by schooling status at endline**

Place/type of work	Percent working	
	In school	Not in school
Fields	67.1	74.2
Poultry/livestock	94.7	87.1
Home craft	30.3*	9.7*
Vendor/construction	60.5	61.3
Any labor force work	97.4	96.8

\*Difference between the two groups significant at  $p=0.01$ .

## Friendships and Peer Networks

The prevailing code of modesty in Upper Egypt forces parents to severely restrict a girl's physical mobility and thus her social sphere once she reaches puberty. Ishraq participation was not the only factor affecting girls' friendships. Marriage appears to have the greatest effect on the likelihood that a girl will have and maintain friends. Although virtually all the girls interviewed were unmarried at the baseline, 17 percent of all girls were married by the endline, including 5 percent of full-term program participants (see discussion below). The risk of losing friends is particularly high among girls who married during the course of the program. One-quarter of those who had friends at the baseline and who subsequently married reported in the endline survey that they had no friends.

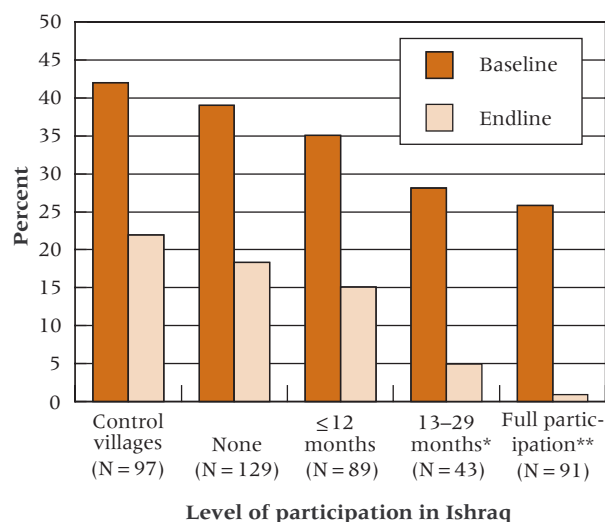
## Attitudes about Marriage and Childbearing

For rural Egyptian girls approaching their late teens, marriage is a frequent topic. Marriage defines a girl's transition from childhood to adulthood, and the husband chosen for her will shape her adult life. The pressure on parents to ensure that a girl is safely married is ever-present. Of course, "safely married" can be a misnomer if girls are forced into unwanted marriages, are subject to female genital cutting in preparation for marriage, or are married before they have attained physical maturity. Ishraq promoters encouraged girls to delay marriage past the legal age of 16 to allow time for education and physical and emotional maturity.

As shown in Figure 2, the proportion of girls preferring to be married before age 18 dropped substantially from baseline to endline for all girls, indicating either that girls change their attitudes about early marriage over time or that national messages discouraging early marriage are reaching these rural communities or a combination of the two. Nevertheless, the figure also indicates that the longer the exposure to Ishraq, the greater the decline between baseline and endline in the proportion preferring marriage before age 18. Girls living in program villages who did not participate in Ishraq and girls who took part for one year or less had virtually the same level of decline in the desire to marry before age 18 as girls in the control villages; paired comparison between both groups and the control villages showed statistically insignificant results. Girls who spent more than one year in Ishraq but



**FIGURE 2** Percent of girls who report a preference to be married before age 18, baseline and endline surveys



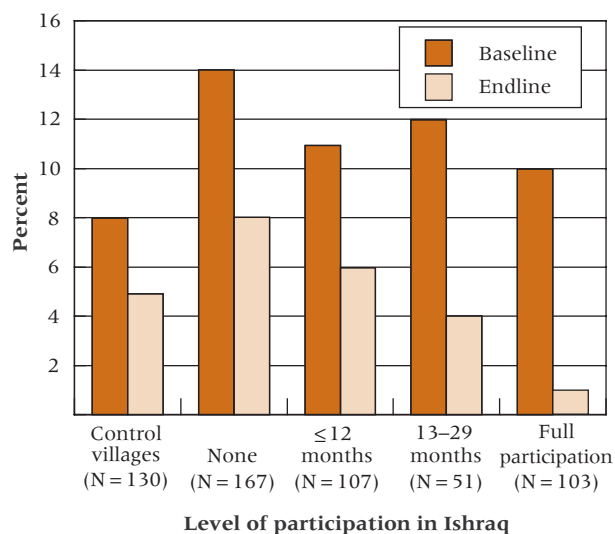
\*Significant at  $p=0.05$ ; \*\*  $p=0.01$ .

did not complete the program had a greater change in attitude, with the proportion desiring to marry early dropping from 28 percent at baseline to 5 percent at endline. Full-term participants had the greatest decline, from 26 percent to 1 percent. Both groups experienced changes in attitudes about ideal age at marriage that were significantly different from the changes recorded among either the control group or the nonparticipants in program villages.

It should be noted that girls who participated for more than a year as well as full-term participants already had different attitudes about early marriage before the program. This suggests an association between the desire to delay marriage and participation in Ishraq. Ishraq is therefore selective of girls who wish to delay marriage, partly because those who desire to marry early are less likely to participate or tend to leave the program prematurely. This in no way calls into question the effectiveness of the program in changing attitudes about early marriage, but suggests that full-term participants tend to be girls (and families) who are more receptive to this message.

Attitudes about who should make decisions governing marriage are also affected by participation in Ishraq. Girls were asked whether family members alone should select a husband for a girl or whether she should be a party to the decision. As shown in Figure 3, the proportion who said that family alone should select a girl's husband was not systematically different across the control and pro-

**FIGURE 3** Percent of girls who say that family members alone should select a girl's husband, baseline and endline surveys



gram groups at baseline, varying from 8 to 14 percent. At endline, the main difference emerges for girls who had more than one year of participation and for full-term participants. Only 4 percent of girls with 13 to 29 months of exposure and 1 percent of full-term participants stated that a girl should have no say in the selection of her husband, compared to 6–8 percent for other groups of participants. However, the difference in the change in attitude from baseline to endline between the control group and each of the intervention groups was statistically insignificant.

Attitudes toward fertility and childbearing also changed over time for all girls in the study, but are particularly affected by exposure to the program. Figure 4 indicates that the proportion of girls who say they desire fewer than three children has risen for all groups from baseline to endline. This may reflect the impact of national trends toward fertility decline. Girls in Ishraq villages appear to be more disposed to smaller family sizes than those in the control villages, even at baseline. Nevertheless, it is clear from the figure that increasing exposure to Ishraq is associated with a larger change in attitude from baseline to endline in favor of smaller families. The proportion preferring smaller families in the two groups with greatest exposure increased by 18 and 12 percentage points, respectively, as compared to a 5 to 8 percentage point increase for other comparison groups. The change in attitude toward the preferred number of children between

the control group and each of the program groups was statistically significant.

As expected, very few girls in any of the groups were married at baseline because of their age (13–15 years). Unsurprisingly, marriage rates at endline are higher among nonparticipants in program villages than in control villages (22 percent vs. 16 percent). If girls who are likely to marry early select themselves out of the program or are forced to drop out at marriage, then participants, especially full-term participants, will have lower marriage rates at the endline even if the program has no effect on delaying marriage.

In the program villages, the marriage rate declined with the extent of participation in Ishraq. The rate married by the endline among those participating less than 12 months was similar to that of nonparticipants at 22 percent. The rate among those participating 13 to 29 months was 12 percent and that among full-term participants was 5 percent. These results must be interpreted with caution, however. Controlling for background factors using multivariate analysis still does not correct for unobservable characteristics, such as family traditions and conservative outlook, that may lead to early marriage among some girls.

## Gender Role Attitudes

The Ishraq curriculum was infused with messages on gender equity. Does exposure to such a curricu-

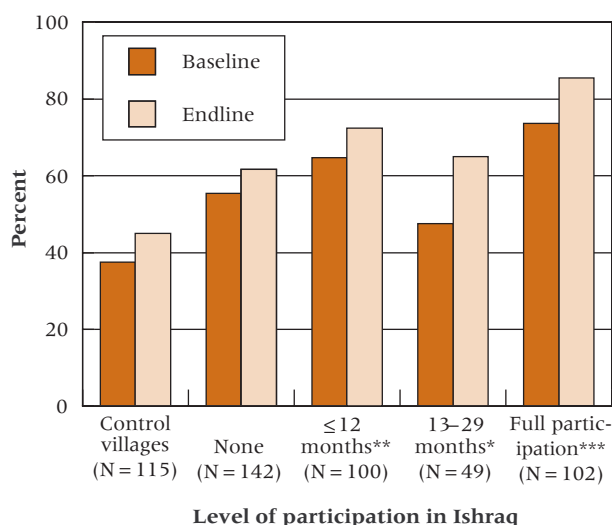
“I would’ve been married without this class. We all would have. There are still parents who want to get us married.”

—Ishraq participant

lum alter girls’ attitudes toward power relations and the division of labor between the sexes? The survey included statements reflecting the patriarchal norms and behaviors prevalent in Egyptian society. It combined ten statements related to attitudes about work, marriage, responsibilities, and so forth into an index. (See Appendix 4.) One point was assigned for each “equitable” response: girls’ scores on the index may range from 0 to 10 (least to most equitable gender role attitudes).

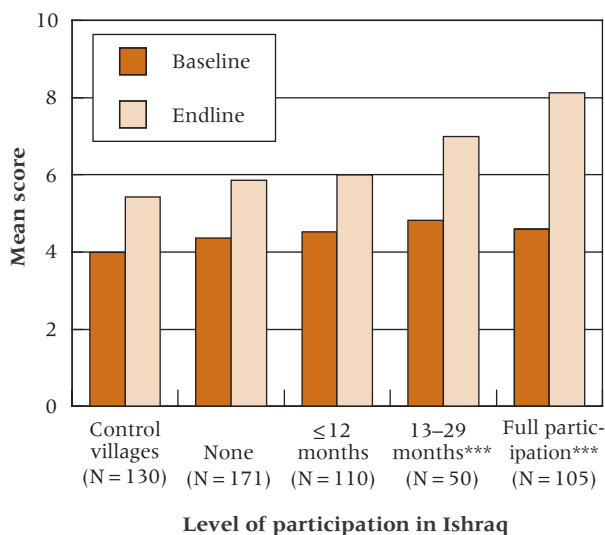
Figure 5 displays mean scores on the gender role attitude index for each category of program participation at baseline and endline. Overall, gender role attitudes appear to become more equitable as girls mature. The change in the index for girls with one year or less of participation is not significantly different from the changes for girls with no participation or those in the control villages. However, girls with more than one year and with full participation in the program clearly changed the most in the desired direction. The change in the mean score for these two groups was statistically significant compared to the control group.

**FIGURE 4** Percent of girls who say they desire fewer than three children, baseline and endline surveys



\*Significant at  $p=0.05$ ; \*\*  $p=0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p=0.001$ .

**FIGURE 5** Mean scores on the gender role attitude index, baseline and endline surveys



\*\*\*Significant at  $p=0.001$ .

## Health Knowledge and Behavior

The Ishraq curriculum provided information about important aspects of adolescents' and women's health and their bodies, and it contained messages opposing common myths and traditional practices that present risks to girls' health. The survey included questions gauging girls' absorption and retention of such messages, as well as inquiries about their actual health practices.

At the endline survey, Ishraq participants are distinguished from other groups of girls by markedly better knowledge related to nutrition, anemia, and smoking. Reproductive health knowledge also improved with increased exposure to the program: participation is associated with enhanced awareness of pubertal changes, knowledge of contraceptive methods and sexually transmitted diseases, and ability to identify danger signs that occur after giving birth. On the other hand, confusion persists regarding some aspects of fertility. For example, participation in the program had no effect on girls' ability to name the stage of the menstrual cycle when a woman is most likely to conceive. The survey found a positive relationship between participation in Ishraq and the ability to identify elements of prenatal and antenatal care, the topics of a recent public education campaign.

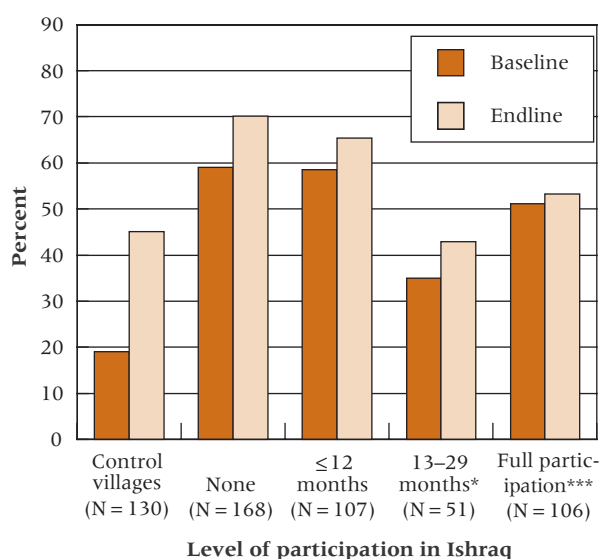
One of the main threats to sexual and reproductive health and rights in Egypt is female genital

cutting. Estimates vary as to the percentage of adult women who have undergone FGC, but most statistics range from 80 to 95 percent (El-Gibaly et al. 2002). Villages have different traditions regarding when genital cutting takes place; some carry out the operation when the girl is very young, others when she enters puberty, and others just before marriage. These differences between villages are clearly reflected in the differences shown in Figure 6 in prevalence of FGC at baseline within the control and program villages.

As expected, as girls matured, the prevalence of FGC increased within each sub-group of the population, but much more so in the control villages, which apparently carry out this practice at a later age, on average, than the program villages. The small rates of increase in FGC prevalence between baseline and endline in the program villages suggest that most girls who were going to be circumcised had already been circumcised by the beginning of the program. Thus the program had little chance to affect prevalence of the practice among this first generation of participants.

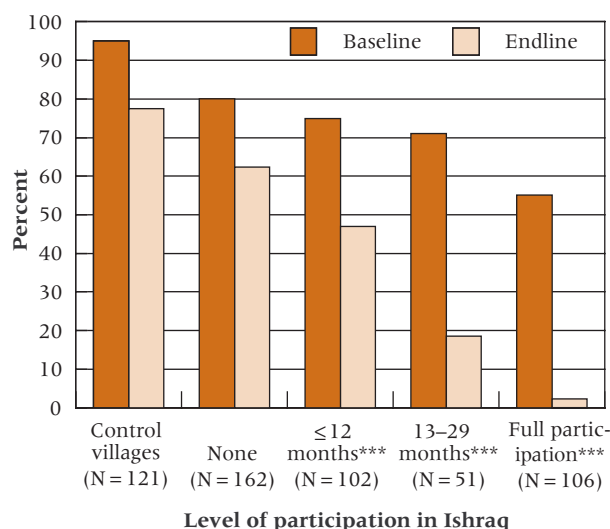
To determine the effects of exposure to Ishraq on attitudes toward female genital cutting, girls were asked a number of questions about their support of the practice, including their intention to circumcise their daughters. While support for the practice declined over time among all girls, the

**FIGURE 6 Percent of girls who have undergone genital cutting, baseline and endline surveys**



\*Significant at  $p=0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p=0.001$ .

**FIGURE 7 Percent of girls who intend to circumcise their daughters in the future, baseline and endline surveys**



\*\*\*Significant at  $p=0.001$ .

extent of continued support for FGC is inversely proportional to the degree of participation in Ishraq, as shown in Figure 7. Participation was successful (likely along with other factors) in reducing support for the practice for full-term participants, and it has significantly reduced support from 71 percent to 18 percent among girls who participated for more than a year. The paired comparison between each of the program groups and the control group showed statistically significant change of responses from baseline to endline.

Even girls who reside in the program villages but did not participate in Ishraq had a larger change in attitude than the control group, indicating that a gradual shift in village attitudes may be occurring through peer networks. However, the paired comparison between the control group and girls in the program villages who did not join Ishraq showed an insignificant change in response. Because the decision to perform female genital cutting is not made exclusively by the mother, but also involves the paternal grandmother and other members of the family, this change in attitude does not guarantee the elimination of the practice among the future daughters of Ishraq graduates, but it is clearly an important step in that direction.

## Sports and Recreation

The incorporation of sports into Ishraq is a unique and critical program component. The Ishraq partners viewed sports as a means for girls to form peer networks, learn teamwork, and exercise leadership. Working in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth, Ishraq staff were able to offer recreational and sports activities to girls at local youth centers. Baseline and endline surveys measured the amount of time spent playing sports, and another survey demonstrated that the vast majority of girls had a high regard for sports: 94 percent enjoyed playing sports and 99 percent would encourage their daughters to do so. The girls also felt they had benefited from playing sports: 90 percent cited improved physical health and 59 percent claimed improved mental health.

For benefits derived from sports to last, the Ishraq partners felt it was essential that parents and siblings support the initiative. The survey found that mothers were slightly more likely than fathers to support girls' participation in sports (63 percent vs. 59 percent). Brothers were the least likely to support their sisters (39 percent). Corroborating these results, the endline survey found that almost half of

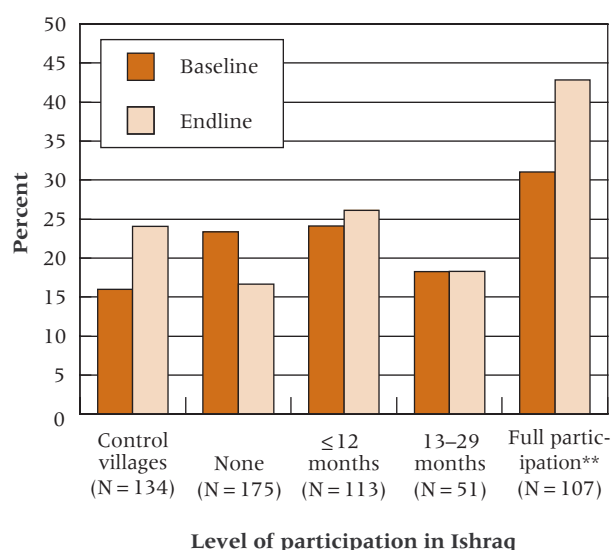
Ishraq graduates continued to play sports, while only 10 percent of nonparticipants and 3 percent of girls in the control villages did so. These results emphasize the success of the sports component and the importance of family and community support for the continuation of the Ishraq initiative.

## Harassment and Violence

One of the partners' concerns in conducting Ishraq was that as the girls broke some well-established social taboos, such as participating in sports and in the public sphere, they would be subjected to increased harassment and possibly increased violence. Participation in Ishraq does in fact appear to be associated with increased exposure to verbal harassment.

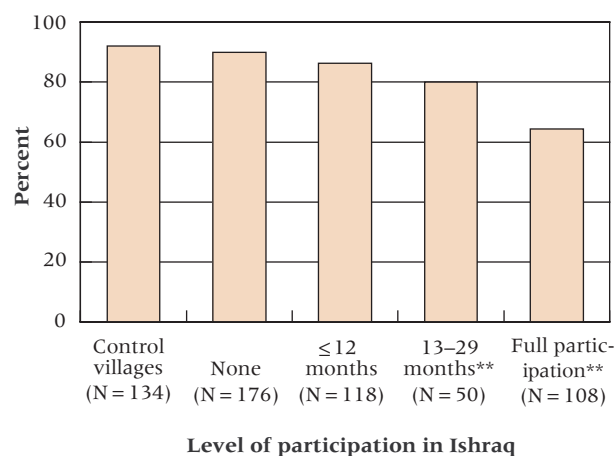
As shown in Figure 8, the proportion of girls who experienced harassment either sometimes or often was fairly uniform across the groups at baseline, but increased sharply at endline for girls who were full-term participants in Ishraq. Although the measured increase is significantly larger than that for the control group, the fact that, statistically, the same pattern does not hold for girls with partial participation, either for more than a year or a year or less, casts some doubt on this result. The reported increase in harassment may simply be due to the

**FIGURE 8** Percent of girls who report experiencing verbal harassment sometimes or often, baseline and endline surveys



\*\*Significant at  $p=0.01$ .

**FIGURE 9** Percent of girls who agree that a girl should be beaten if she disobeys her brother, endline survey



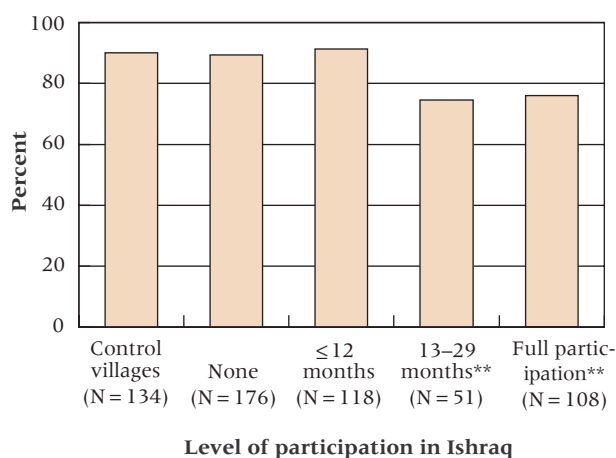
\*\*Significant at p=0.01.

greater awareness by full-term participants of what constitutes verbal harassment.

Experiencing violence in the form of being struck is a routine occurrence for adolescent girls in rural Upper Egypt. Eighteen percent of respondents in the endline survey reported recently experiencing violence. Moreover, there were no significant differences in the rate of being subjected to such violence by extent of participation in Ishraq. The source of violence is overwhelmingly a family member, with 90 percent of girls who experienced violence in the last month identifying a member of their immediate family as the perpetrator. Of these, brothers are the most likely offenders. Again participation in Ishraq had little effect on these responses.

While experience of violence varied little with level of participation in Ishraq, attitudes toward violence were noticeably different between groups of girls. As shown in Figure 9, the proportion of girls agreeing that a girl should be beaten if she disobeyed her brother declines with the length of participation in Ishraq. Sixty-four percent of full-term participants compared to 93 percent of the control group agreed with such a statement. The comparison between the two groups is statistically significant. Figure 10 shows a decline with length of participation in Ishraq in the proportion agreeing that a girl should be beaten if she goes out without permission, but the proportions who approve remain high for full-term participants, albeit significantly lower than for the control group. This no doubt reflects the degree

**FIGURE 10** Percent of girls who agree that a girl should be beaten if she goes out without permission, endline survey



\*\*Significant at p=0.01.

to which all respondents have internalized norms about social control of adolescent girls.

## Concluding Remarks

The endline assessment took place four months after Ishraq's 30-month pilot program ended and may therefore not have captured its full impact. Ishraq's impact will only become apparent several years later as these girls complete their transitions to adulthood: getting married, bearing children, and becoming decisionmakers in their own households. A long-term assessment would ideally include measurement of the program's impact on the intergenerational transmission of poverty, age at marriage, level of fertility, reproductive health, child health and nutrition, and the reduction or elimination of harmful practices such as female genital cutting. Despite its inherent limitations, this short-term assessment of Ishraq's impact detected noteworthy effects on the lives of the girls who participated in the program. Girls in the program villages were more likely to enroll in school for the first time or return to school, to know about key health and rights issues, to score higher on a gender role attitudes index, to make and keep friends, and to oppose subjecting their daughters to genital cutting. They also had higher literacy rates and greater academic skills and were freer to move about their community and participate in sports than were girls in matched control villages.



## Expanding Programs for Poor Girls in Socially Conservative Settings: Charting a New Map

The Ishraq program faces a critical challenge—expansion from an effective pilot reaching a small number of girls to a program seeking to make a difference in the lives of thousands of girls in Egypt’s poorest governorates. One goal is to extend the achievements realized in the pilot phase to a much larger group of girls in the same communities where investments have already been made, as well as in new communities in other parts of rural Upper Egypt. A further goal is to institutionalize Ishraq within local community structures to enhance its sustainability. The achievements of the pilot phase can be summarized as follows:

- creating safe public spaces for girls;
- improving girls’ functional literacy, recreational opportunities, life skills, health knowledge and attitudes, and mobility;
- positively influencing social norms concerning girls’ life opportunities; and
- improving local and national policymakers’ support for girl-friendly measures and policies.

The Ishraq partners plan to expand and consolidate these achievements in the next phase through an approach that (i) reinforces reliable access to nationally guaranteed rights and entitlements that recipients and their peers can claim on a permanent basis, (ii) consolidates changes and benefits derived from the human capital investments in Ishraq graduates, promoters, sports leaders, and community leaders, and (iii) maximizes the involvement of new communities through explicit agreements and commitments. Ishraq’s partners recognize that expanding programs for adolescent girls who are not in school, who have limited access to learning and little control over their lives, and who have largely been underserved by social services differs from expanding programs where



As Egypt enters a critical period of reform and redefinition of citizenship, it is vital that adolescent girls be included as a central part of the process.

more conventional approaches can be used. The needs of disempowered, voiceless groups such as poor rural girls are rarely a high priority either in community demands or in government programs, making such groups the hardest for programs to reach effectively even in a pilot phase. Expanding such programs and replicating them elsewhere is likely to be far more difficult.

The expansion of Ishraq will be undertaken over a period of three years. During this time, the program will be introduced in as many as 30 villages in the Upper Egyptian governorates of Al Minya, Beni Suef, and Fayoum. With about 50 girls initially recruited into the program per village, followed by annual recruitments, the partners hope to reach about 3,000 girls and their families, while at the same time building a supportive local staff who can take ownership of the program over the long run. Since the end of the pilot phase, the program has continued in two of the original four villages and has been introduced in four new villages in Al Minya. In early 2006, it was inaugurated in another five villages in the governorate of Beni Suef.

The Ishraq partners have incorporated a number of important lessons in the design of the next stage. For instance, the age group for eligibility will

be extended from the current 13–15 to 11–15 to allow more graduates to enter the formal education system, to more effectively address the problem of early marriage, and to increase the probability of influencing girls and their families before they have been subjected to female genital cutting. Girls will be divided into classes by age group to ensure similar levels of maturity. Moreover, a detailed review of the curriculum has shown that the program can be condensed into 20 months instead of the original 30 months. The shortening of the program was made possible by carefully eliminating any overlap between the Caritas literacy curriculum and the CEDPA life skills curriculum. A shorter duration will make it easier to recruit participants and will reduce the likelihood that girls will drop out before completing the program.

The Ishraq partners have conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses throughout the pilot phase. Given the novelty of programs like Ishraq that target adolescent girls, they plan to conduct a full assessment of at least the initial phases of the expansion to ensure that the benefits observed in the pilot are realized when the program is replicated on a larger scale. This assessment will include a randomized program and control group design, regular monitoring throughout the 20-month period, an endline survey, and a tracking component that follows graduates over time.

The program design consists of selecting about a dozen eligible villages from each district, randomly selecting from them five program and two control villages, and identifying the eligible target group of out-of-school girls between ages 11 and 15. Before participants are recruited, the Ishraq partners will conduct a baseline survey among a sample of all eligible girls in the program and control villages. They will then recruit two classes of 25 girls each in all program villages. At the end of 20 months, the endline survey will cover the same sample interviewed in the baseline, whether or not they participated in the program. The partners will continue to track, document, and analyze the many operational issues involved in expanding the Ishraq model.

The combined resources of Caritas, CEDPA, the Population Council, and Save the Children will be used to create a viable operational structure for a high-quality expanded version of Ishraq. To promote the long-term sustainability of Ishraq, these partners will ensure that the program is

increasingly led by local NGOs. During the pilot phase, the four partners conducted the program, in collaboration with local communities and youth centers. In the expanded phase, the Ishraq partners will collaborate with local NGOs to work with several youth centers in each governorate. The NGOs will “learn by doing” as they participate, replicating the Ishraq program in new communities.

The remainder of this section outlines the strategy for expansion along the three-step approach identified above:

### **Reinforcing Reliable Access by Girls to Nationally Guaranteed Rights and Entitlements**

Future participants in Ishraq are girls who, at this stage, can neither drive demand for services nor shape program delivery. This group is, in theory, entitled to a number of nationally guaranteed rights, such as the right to schooling, the right to health insurance and health care, and the right to participate in the life of the community as full citizens. Because of various social barriers at the household, community, and regional levels, these girls have not been able to access these rights. One of the main objectives in expanding Ishraq is to ensure reliable access to these rights by establishing the visibility of adolescent girls in their own communities and among national policymakers. The Ishraq partners expect that in each new setting they will need to negotiate with gatekeepers at the family, community, and governorate levels to create an environment in which Ishraq can thrive. They also expect to collaborate with the Ministries of Youth, Health, and Education and with other national agencies concerned with the welfare of children and youth. Indeed, one of the strengths of the Ishraq pilot program was its ability to demonstrate the value of working cross-sectorally with various ministries and community-based institutions.

The long-term goal is to institutionalize Ishraq within existing structures (e.g., government agencies, NGOs, youth centers, community development associations) to ensure its sustainability. To achieve sustainability, Ishraq’s objectives must be increasingly perceived as aligned with national objectives. Ishraq is already seen as directly supporting the Girls’ Education Initiative of the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood

(NCCM), which seeks to improve the educational status of girls in the most disadvantaged areas of Egypt. It is also directly aligned with the mandate of the Ministry of Youth (now the Supreme Council for Youth) to improve girls' participation in youth centers, expand capacity for development at the grassroots level, and transform youth centers into viable community resources. The strategic partnership forged with these national agencies during the pilot phase must be strengthened and reinforced in the coming years.

The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood is committed to realizing the national goal of eliminating illiteracy. NCCM is committed to being an effective advocate and intermediary on behalf of Ishraq in all its interactions with official bodies and governmental institutions. For instance, NCCM plans to help smooth the entry of Ishraq graduates into formal schooling by accelerating the issuance of literacy certificates for girls who pass the adult literacy exam and by collaborating with the Ministry of Education to ensure their timely enrollment. NCCM has also intervened with the Ministry of Interior to facilitate the issuance of national identity cards to girls who reach age 16, and the issuance of birth certificates to girls who were not registered at birth. NCCM is expected to play a critical role in helping to obtain health insurance coverage for Ishraq participants. Currently, a child's right to health insurance in Egypt is dependent on his or her enrollment in school; out-of-school children are thus denied this right. The Ishraq partners have successfully obtained health insurance coverage for Ishraq participants, but this achievement needs to be institutionalized at the next stage. Through its access to the national media, NCCM is in a knowledgeable position to describe Ishraq's achievements to a national audience.

Since the pilot phase, Ishraq has also forged a strategic partnership with the Supreme Council for Youth. Responding to the 2001 Ministerial Decree dedicated to increasing the access of girls and women to the nation's youth centers, the Ishraq partners have signed a formal protocol with the Ministry that dedicates specific times and spaces for Ishraq participants and other young women in village youth centers. As a step toward institutionalizing this entitlement, Ishraq is working to ensure that written public notices announcing the times when the youth centers are dedicated to the exclusive use of girls are clearly posted in all participating centers.

## Consolidating Change and Benefiting from Human Capital Investments

Considerable investments have been made in the communities where Ishraq was carried out or is currently being offered. A key goal is to capitalize on these investments to consolidate changes in the communities where Ishraq has already been implemented and to help spread the innovation to nearby communities. The investments include the training and experience gained by promoters and sports leaders. Specifically, promoters and sports leaders were trained in communication, leadership, and negotiation skills, and they participated in workshops on team building and gender sensitivity. Considerable investments have also been made in gaining the appreciation of community leaders and parents of the value of education and sports for their daughters. Finally, one of the most vital assets of the program is the self-confidence and leadership skills gained by the Ishraq graduates themselves.

The next phase must capitalize on these gains by recruiting a second group of participants in the same villages, followed by annual recruitment of new Ishraq classes. This will ensure that promoters and sports leaders continue to be engaged and will safeguard the investments that have been made in their human capital. A related goal is to build on the investments already made in the graduates themselves as they negotiate the transition to adulthood. These newly empowered young women must be encouraged to sustain their presence in the public arena by continuing to use the youth centers for group activities and continuing to interact with one another. One proposal is to establish an Ishraq graduates' fund, which would combine provision of small monetary grants with personal savings to finance continued schooling, skills building, and livelihoods training. Ishraq graduates would be encouraged to formulate plans for using these funds to further their development, thus contributing to their financial know-how.

## Maximizing the Involvement of New Communities

The main thrust of the expansion stage is to extend Ishraq to new communities in other governorates of Upper Egypt. The objective is to bring as many rural communities as possible to the point where social norms about the life opportunities of adolescent girls can be transformed in a fundamental way. The



Ishraq partners hypothesize that such a “tipping point” would occur when approximately 20 to 30 percent of eligible girls in a community have been enrolled. To realistically reach this point after two or three rounds of recruitment, the Ishraq partners intend to select intermediate-size villages with between 250 and 650 eligible girls. This range includes the vast majority of villages in the three governorates that are being targeted in the next stage.

In recruiting new villages to the program, the NGO partners will seek to forge explicit agreements with the village leadership, preferably in the form of a community contract. The contract will specify the requirements incumbent upon the village, which include the availability of a community or youth center with dedicated learning and playing

space for Ishraq participants, the option for graduates to enter or re-enter school, and an annual village campaign to ensure that all children have birth certificates, access to health insurance, and national identity cards by the legal age of 16. In addition, they plan to draft a “family contract” through which parents indicate their commitment to have their daughters complete the full 20 months of the program. Finally, the partners will seek agreement from girls and their parents that they will commit themselves to at least an 80 percent participation in scheduled program activities. By doing this the Ishraq partners acknowledge that insisting on complete attendance is unrealistic in light of girls’ numerous responsibilities in their homes and in the fields.

## Conclusions

Ishraq, an innovative program for out-of-school adolescent girls, is aimed at promoting literacy, creating awareness of rights, enhancing life skills, and building solidarity and social support. Through the efforts of Ishraq, new opportunities are opening up for adolescent girls in rural villages of Upper Egypt.

Ishraq has made a substantive contribution to demonstrating that the expanded participation of young girls in Egyptian society is possible and urgently needed in order to break the cycles of poverty and disadvantage. Ishraq is committed to sharing knowledge about the program's potential to bring new opportunities to poor adolescent girls in socially conservative settings.

Analysis of Ishraq demonstrates that with thoughtful planning and committed partnerships it is feasible to introduce a multi-dimensional program with novel and ground-breaking elements for adolescent girls in Upper Egyptian villages. Further, it is both necessary and possible to gain the approval and support of parents. The findings presented in this report indicate that the program has positively influenced girls' knowledge and attitudes, has raised their aspirations and skills, and has begun to change social norms about girls' roles and capacities.

The pilot program demonstrated the feasibility of identifying effective strategies to increase rural girls' participation in public life. The Ishraq experience suggests that creating safe spaces for girls is the first step in expanding the role of women in the public sphere. Ishraq has succeeded in reaching girls with new ideas, skills, and opportunities. It has done so by responding to the community's needs and concerns, while providing structured opportunities for overcoming illiteracy, increasing healthy behaviors, and developing the abilities of underserved girls.

Ishraq has also trained young female secondary school graduates as promoters and leaders in their own villages, providing them with training for skills such as outreach, advocacy, communication, and networking. By the end of the pilot program, some Ishraq promoters had formed women's associations in their communities, joined political groups, accepted local leadership positions, and lobbied successfully



Gender equity will remain elusive until policies and programs are linked to the daily experience of poor and marginalized young women. There is a clear need for inclusive political processes and strong partnerships with civil society in order to advance those goals.

to increase the access of girls and women to local youth centers. Such civic development activities represent a notable training ground for effective citizenship, particularly when political channels and processes are perceived as remote and inaccessible to girls and women. By empowering these young women, Ishraq creates a group of young leaders able to participate effectively in local politics and to act as role models for others.

Initially the "safe spaces" concept was metaphorical, based on the observation that girls lacked safe public spaces where they could engage in independent activities and interact with others. Over time the youth centers increasingly took on this role. Given that in Upper Egypt the social barriers that young girls face in gaining access to youth centers are even greater than those in gaining access to schools, the success of Ishraq in this respect is noteworthy.

The ability of young women to engage in the public life of their communities is also dependent on the commitment of policymakers to respond to the needs and priorities of underserved women. Despite a generally positive environment for the formulation of gender-sensitive policies, real gender equity will remain elusive until policies and programs are directly linked to the daily experience of poor and marginalized young women. There is a clear need for inclusive political processes and strong partnerships with civil society in order to advance those goals. Ishraq offers an opportunity to ensure that adolescent girls are included in the process.

## Appendix 1. Village Descriptions

**VILLAGE 1**, which has 9,700 inhabitants, is the only site in the study with a majority Christian population. Villagers are spatially segregated, with Christians residing in the north, where a large church is also situated, and Muslims living in the south. Program activities in village 1 were hosted by one of the two local primary schools. The village has no preparatory or secondary school, and students wishing to continue their education beyond the primary level usually travel to Samalout, the district capital, 16 kilometers away. The local church is very active and offers literacy classes to residents under the age of 25. With the exception of a health center run by the Ministry of Health and Population, no other health services exist.

**VILLAGE 2** is a large and relatively accessible village of 13,900 residents. It is 18 kilometers from Samalout and has two primary schools and one preparatory school. Program activities took place in the local youth center. Two dynamic community development associations (CDAs) are located in the village. With a grant from Save the Children and small payments made in installments by villagers, one CDA connects homes to the public water system. CARE has also helped to develop and extend the coverage of the water system. Microcredit is available to skilled workers and youth through programs managed by the local CDA and Save the Children. The local church and Caritas operate literacy classes for villagers, while the local youth center offers literacy classes to girls aged 8–18. The youth center also provides training in sewing and knitting for females aged 12–25. The church hosts a small garment production shop for girls.

**VILLAGE 3**, one of the two control sites, has 8,300 residents. Its population is entirely Muslim, and it is visibly more conservative than other sites, as evidenced by a number of women wearing the *niqab*, or face veil. The village has only one primary school, and no preparatory or secondary education is available in the village. Health services are offered by the local health center. The local mosque collects and manages a small fund for the sponsorship of orphans. Save the Children has recently started a child nutrition program. Further community-based development activities are crippled by a dispute between two prominent families in the village, according to informants. People traveling to or from the village must cross by ferry to reach the main road.

**VILLAGE 4**, with a population of 5,100, is a small but vibrant mother village, meaning that it is the administrative center of several other villages in the area (including all study sites except one). The local Village Council convenes here. The village's prominence can be attributed to the fact that it is the home of an influential politician (deceased) from the Nasser era and his brother, who now sits in the People's Assembly. A police station is

located on the village's main road. The village has two primary schools (one of which is run by Al Azhar) and two preparatory schools (one Azhari). In September 2001 a new secondary school was opened. The local health center is exceptionally well equipped and has a small dental clinic. The CDA offers training in carpet weaving for youth, helping participants to produce and market goods. Youth are also involved with the CDA in a bee-hives and honey project for income generation. Another local society opened a medical treatment center. Save the Children's initiatives in this community consist of a child nutrition program and a child survival program. Women are well represented in the village's development efforts. One woman sits on the board of the local CDA, and an active women's committee staffs a children's nursery and helps coordinate a computer training class. After completion of data collection here, the research team learned that CARE intended to open an education program for girls aged 8 to 15 years. Meetings held among senior staff to address this issue concluded with the agreement that CARE would restrict its target group to girls aged 8 to 12 so as not to overlap with participants in Ishraq.

**VILLAGE 5**, located 15 kilometers from Samalout and with a population of 20,800, is ethnically distinct from the other study sites. Although most residents are now sedentary and engaged in agriculture, they trace their ancestry to nomadic Bedouins and refer to themselves as *Arab* (Arabs) as opposed to *fallaheen* (peasants). Because of existing ethnic ties and kin relations, many male members of the community live and work for part of the year in Libya. In keeping with Arab traditions, residents place great economic value on livestock. Ishraq activities were implemented in the preparatory school. There are two other schools in the village, both for primary education. There is no CDA, although there is a formidable array of community development activities. The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood runs a literacy class for local women and offers knitting lessons and organizes cultural activities for women aged 21 to 35. In addition, Save the Children runs child nutrition and child sponsorship programs.

**VILLAGE 6** was selected as a second control village after data collection was completed in other sites. Its population numbers 8,300. There are two primary schools and one preparatory school in the village, but no secondary school. The village has a youth center and a health center. Headed by a local woman, the CDA is very active. With backing from Save the Children, it coordinates a micro-credit program for women, including health awareness sessions at the monthly meetings. The CDA also collaborates with Save the Children to extend coverage of the public water system, and offers vocational training for girls and assists them in producing and marketing sewn and knitted products.

## Appendix 2. Sampling Design and Data Collection Methodology

The evaluation research began with a simple household enumeration that recorded the schooling status and age of household members less than 20 years old. The goal for the baseline was to interview a saturation sample of out-of-school girls 13–15 years of age in the selected villages. However, to capture as many eligible girls as possible, slightly older and slightly younger out-of-school girls in the community were also interviewed. This peripheral sample comprising girls aged 11–12 and 16–17 was deemed necessary because of the difficulties in confirming reported age in this setting. Although it was not possible to determine the exact proportion of the targeted population—out-of-school girls aged 13 to 15—that was reached in the baseline and endline surveys, it is likely the vast majority of that population in the study villages was reached. In more recent surveys involving the same target population conducted in similar settings, the response rate exceeded 90 percent. Reasons for non-response include age misreporting in the original listing of the target population, the inability to find some girls who do not reside full-time in the village, mental or physical disability, and refusal to participate in the interview.

### Development of Survey Instruments

The baseline research instruments designed to measure program impact on out-of-school girls were drafted drawing on questions used internationally by the Population Council. Additional questions were developed by a working group that convened periodically in Cairo and sought to identify benchmarks of change in the lives of young rural girls. After translation into Arabic the baseline questionnaire was presented to the working group for fine-tuning. Discussions held with representatives of the four NGO partners at the drafting stages were crucial in developing an instrument that was manageable and responsive to study objectives, while at the same time being appropriate for the context of Al Minya. A pre-test was carried out before the baseline questionnaire was finalized and fielded.

Approximately 15 months after the start of the Ishraq pilot program, 65 girls who had joined the program after its inception, and who had been missed by the baseline survey, were interviewed at the midpoint. Although collected some time after these girls joined the program, these midpoint data are considered a proxy baseline measurement.

The endline questionnaire was very similar to the long midpoint instrument, with some additional questions targeting issues of special interest. Many of the same interviewers who collected the midpoint data were used, thus reducing the time needed for training. Interviews were con-

ducted with all eligible respondents in their homes. Eight percent of the respondents were lost to follow-up. Most of these girls had left the village, often because of marriage.

### Data Collection Procedures

For all rounds of data collection, the data were coded, entered, and cleaned centrally in Cairo. For open-ended questions, response categories were tallied, collapsed, and assigned codes. During the data management phase, a data cleaning program produced lists of outlying values, errors in skip patterns, and contradictions in the internal logic of the data. Errors thus identified were checked against the original questionnaires and, to the extent possible, corrected manually.

### Data Quality

The informal recruitment method employed resulted in an over-representation of the neighbors and acquaintances of the promoters. It also led to recruitment of a number of girls who were later discovered to be outside the age limits or geographical boundaries for participation. Absence of accurate data on the age of individual girls is perhaps the greatest shortcoming of this dataset. At baseline, 5 percent of girls in the sample reported that they did not have a birth certificate or did not know whether they had one. An additional 41 percent of respondents could not produce a birth certificate, thereby obliging interviewers to estimate their age based on the age of siblings and neighbors currently enrolled in school.

The Ishraq program's monitoring and evaluation system called for documentation of the reasons why individual participants dropped out of the program. Reasons were recorded on the attendance records maintained by promoters. Several other sources of data provided information on the obstacles to participation encountered by participants and implementers. These included case studies conducted among a limited number of program dropouts, as well as the verbal accounts of classroom and sports promoters. These multiple data sources sometimes contained contradictions. The reasons for dropout cited in any of these data sources may be based on the account of the participant herself, the participant's parents or family members, her peers, or others. Several reasons could be given for a participant's failure to complete the program. While several factors may have combined to cause a participant to drop out, it is also possible that one of these factors had a predominant effect in impeding her participation. Moreover, in certain circumstances informants, whether they are participants, parents, or program staff, are unlikely to disclose the true reason for discontinuing.

## Appendix 3. Multivariate Analysis of Ishraq's Impact on Literacy Skills

Independent variables	Dependent variables					
	Ability to read a small passage	Ability to write one's name	Ability to write sibling's name	Ability to write from 1 to 10	Ability to answer a math problem about change	Ability to answer a math problem about distance
Dummy for program nonparticipants <sup>a</sup>	3.109*** (1.279)	1.174 (0.376)	1.900** (0.607)	1.085 (0.319)	3.219* (1.965)	1.056 (0.277)
Dummy for ≤12 months group <sup>a</sup>	3.741*** (1.595)	2.779*** (0.976)	2.226** (0.743)	2.346*** (0.726)	2.031 (1.088)	0.707 (0.213)
Dummy for 13–29 months group <sup>a</sup>	18.020*** (8.611)	++	14.648*** (7.355)	4.882*** (2.245)	0.752 (0.427)	0.750 (0.313)
Dummy for full-term program participants <sup>a</sup>	34.110*** (14.779)	60.521*** (63.250)	40.840*** (21.811)	6.812*** (2.831)	2.854* (1.932)	1.618 (0.498)
Age 16 years old at endline	1.670 (0.601)	0.807 (0.322)	0.783 (0.275)	1.239 (0.400)	1.760 (0.873)	1.378 (0.435)
Age 17 years old at endline	1.485 (0.525)	1.096 (0.439)	0.977 (0.335)	1.171 (0.370)	3.479** (2.006)	1.339 (0.419)
Age ≥18 at endline	1.828* (0.690)	0.772 (0.338)	1.282 (0.480)	1.762 (0.626)	1.972 (1.159)	1.625 (0.545)
Family wealth	1.617 (0.944)	1.480 (0.987)	1.549 (0.908)	2.672* (1.466)	1.965 (1.825)	1.553 (0.775)
Religion <sup>b</sup>	2.401*** (0.760)	3.982*** (1.921)	1.517 (0.563)	2.321** (0.868)	4.371 (4.540)	1.938** (0.551)
Ability to read a small passage at baseline	12.449*** (4.262)					
Ability to write one's name at baseline		3.677*** (0.502)				
Ability to write sibling's name at baseline			3.966*** (0.546)			
Ability to write from 1 to 10 at baseline				2.868*** (0.338)		
Ability to answer a math problem about change at baseline					2.575** (1.126)	
Ability to answer a math problem about distance at baseline						2.159*** (0.429)
Log likelihood	–241.393	–184.753	–229.377	–260.783	–105.032	–311.036
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.318	0.370	0.371	0.269	0.115	0.058
Total number of observations	541	496	542	544	540	481

\*Significant at p=0.05; \*\* p=0.01; \*\*\* p=0.001. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

++ Predicts success perfectly (48 observations dropped). <sup>a</sup> Omitted category is control group. <sup>b</sup> Muslim religion is the omitted category.



## Appendix 4. Gender Sensitivity Index

Gender role attitudes	Percent agreement	
	Baseline	Endline
If the wife works outside home, the husband must help her with housework and child care.	72	88
Women must be wives and mothers only and not work.	65	34
Boys must help with housework just like girls.	40	63
When the family cannot afford to educate all children, only boys should go to school.	41	26
If the husband wants children, the wife must obey him, even if she does not want to have children.	73	68
A girl must obey her brother, even if he is younger.	82	71
Men should have knowledge about pregnancy, delivery, and family planning before marriage.	59	82
A woman who has only daughters must keep trying for a boy.	44	18
A girl should accept a groom chosen by her parents, even if she does not want him.	35	21
The husband should decide how to spend money at home.	72	54

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Adolescence represents the last opportunity to prepare girls for the challenges of adulthood. Failure to reach girls now may well doom them to lives of isolation, poverty, and powerlessness. It also may be their last chance for organized learning and play. In rural Upper Egypt, participation in the **Ishraq program** provides disadvantaged girls the opportunity for structured learning, mentoring, and participation in community life.



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