

## *Empowering Rural Girls in Egypt*



### **ISHRAQ: Safe Places for Out-of School Adolescent Girls to Learn, Play and Grow**

In 2001, Save the Children, in partnership with the Population Council, launched the ISHRAQ project (which in Arabic means "enlightenment"). ISHRAQ, a three-year pilot initiative, worked to improve the life opportunities of rural out-of-school girls, 13-15 years of age, in four target villages in Minya Governorate, one of the poorest areas of Egypt. Partners aimed to achieve this objective by:

- Improving girls' functional literacy, recreational opportunities, livelihood skills, health practices, and mobility;
- Positively influencing social norms concerning girls' life opportunities;
- Improving local and national decision-maker support for girl-friendly measures and policies; and
- Developing positive attitudes of communities and families toward educating girls.



*For the first time, out-of-school girls in rural Egypt have the opportunity to play sports.*

Save the Children and the Population Council developed ISHRAQ strategies in partnership with CARITAS (a national NGO) and the Center for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA). ISHRAQ provided learning opportunities for approximately two hundred out-of-school girls between the ages of 13 and 15. Recognizing adolescent girls often have little decision-making power regarding their own lives, the project also targeted parents, adolescent boys, community leaders and promoters - the local young women who act as facilitators for the girls' learning sessions - to help them recognize girls as members of the community with rights and responsibilities.

### *The Most Disadvantaged Adolescents*

*Rural out-of-school adolescent girls are by far the most disadvantaged of all adolescents in Egypt. According to the 2000 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey, 54 percent of rural Upper Egyptian girls aged 13-15 are not enrolled in the formal education system, compared to 11 percent of boys. In addition to being less likely to acquire basic literacy skills, rural girls have restricted mobility and limited social networks, suffer from relatively poor health and malnutrition, and are at risk of early or forced marriage. Although adolescence can be a time of growth and expanding opportunities, for many girls in Upper Egypt, it is just the opposite.*

## Providing Integrated Learning Opportunities

Public spaces in rural communities are often dominated by men and boys, and girls' use of these facilities is restricted by parents and others for fear of sexual harassment or damage to girls' reputation. Thus, creating safe spaces for girls was a critical first step toward giving them access to learning opportunities.

With the Ministry of Youth and Sports, ISHRAQ used youth centers as a safe space and sports as a vehicle for increasing girls' health knowledge and developing their social skills. The program's integrated interventions combined learning, culture, recreation, sports and community participation and service. Two curricula were used for the learning component: CARITAS' "Learn to be Free," and CEDPA's "New Horizons." The curricula utilized active learning approaches to build literacy skills and lifeskills while also tackling reproductive health and livelihood subjects. The sports component, designed by Save the Children, the Population Council and Minya University, aimed to improve girls' health and physical fitness, social and leadership skills (e.g. social connectedness, cooperation) and self-esteem.



*With newly acquired skills, many ISHRAQ participants are now in school.*

## Creating an Enabling Environment



*Young female facilitators were effective teachers and role models for the out-of-school girls.*

Girls in Upper Egypt face great discrimination and are often not viewed as members of society. ISHRAQ partners worked closely with government ministries and local community development associations in the effort to improve the social and policy environment for adolescent girls. For example, by collaborating with the Ministry of Health, the project secured health cards and in turn access to community health units for out-of-school girls. In addition, although the Ministry of Youth and Sports was initially reluctant to open its youth centers to girls, the Ministry signed a Memorandum of Understanding, as a result of ISHRAQ partners' efforts, to allocate "girl-time" in all youth centers across the country and to ensure a female is represented on the youth center board.

Parents and boys also play important roles in adolescent girls' lives, as they often wield decision-making power regarding girls' education, mobility, and future marriage. As such, ISHRAQ worked with parents, boys as well as the community at large to affect social norms that limit girls' opportunities and mobility and to promote their right to active participation in their families and communities.

## Nora's Story

"One day, a prospective husband proposed to me and my family when I was just 15 years old. I told my mother that I was still young and didn't want to marry yet. My father on the other hand was supportive of the idea of my marriage and he is someone I can never argue with. Around the same time, the ISHRAQ program was holding periodic meetings with the people in the village to discuss issues related to youth. I convinced my mother to attend these meetings. There was a doctor who addressed the topic of early marriage and its harmful effects on girls from a health perspective. A Sheikh also talked about the topic from a religious perspective. After the meeting my mother discussed the problem with an ISHRAQ promoter and the Sheikh and asked for their help in convincing my father to delay my marriage until I was at a more suitable age. They met my father who was not at all pleased with the idea, but after lengthy discussions, they were finally able to convince him. I was over the moon with joy!"

"From that time I made a promise to myself and to my friends that we must all play an active role in helping anyone faced with such a situation. What saddens me is that some of our friends who got married early are now suffering from many problems in their lives because of their early marriage – some are getting divorced while others are facing health problems at such a young age. This motivated me and three of my friends in ISHRAQ to hold meetings with the other girls in our village to raise their awareness about the impact of early marriage and other topics, including FGM. My friends and I are very happy because we feel that we now have a role among our friends and our community."

## ISHRAQ Achievements and Preliminary Results

Project achievements are numerous and evident, both among the girls and in their communities. A midline study conducted by the Population Council in late 2002 provides some promising but preliminary results. (Final evaluation results will be available in mid-2004.) Select examples of results and accomplishments include:

- Acceptance of early marriage significantly declined. Before the project, one in four girls stated a desired age at marriage for self at under 18 years, while during the project, only one in 10 preferred to marry before age 18.



Source: Population Council, 2002

- Girls' favorable attitude towards female genital cutting has dramatically declined from 80 percent to less than 10 percent during project implementation. Furthermore, many girls have taken an active role against FGC in their communities.
- Ninety-five percent of the out-of-school girls participating in ISHRAQ passed the official examination of the General Authority of Literacy and Adult Education. Most of these girls are now enrolled in formal preparatory schools and attend classes daily.

## **ISHRAQ: Future Steps**

To build on ISHRAQ's initial success, both government and non-government partners plan to take the project to national scale. As a first step, the Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood, as well as the Ministry of Youth and Sports, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with all partners (Save the Children, Population Council, CEDPA, and CARITAS) to extend the partnership and to replicate ISHRAQ in 120 villages in Minya, Beni Suef and Fayyoun Governorates. Existing institutions, including NGOs, government agencies, youth centers, community development associations and other local level resources, will be utilized to their fullest extent. Partners are now engaged in fundraising for the expansion, with the goal to institutionalize ISHRAQ into existing local structures, limit overlap of resources and ensure sustainability of the program and its results.



*ISHRAQ enabled adolescent girls in rural Egypt to practice their right to learn, have fun and connect with their peers.*

*Save the Children is grateful to The Summit Foundation for their support of this project.*

*Save the Children is a leading global nonprofit children's relief and development organization working in more than 40 countries, including the United States. Our mission is to make lasting, positive change in the lives of children in need. Save the Children is also a member of the International Save the Children Alliance, comprising 29 independent, national Save the Children organizations working in more than 120 countries to ensure the well-being of children.*

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## **Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health**

*Save the Children's Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health programs enable young people to adopt healthy practices and use quality services that meet their reproductive and sexual health needs.*

*Because adolescents often do not have the capacity or authority to make decisions that affect their reproductive lives, we also work in partnership with key adults, such as parents, teachers, religious and community leaders, and health-service providers to help them understand adolescents' needs and to enable them to engage adolescents in dialogue and decision making.*

*Save the Children is working with young people to improve their reproductive and sexual health in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Bolivia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Malawi, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, and Vietnam.*