

# Bringing Sports and Opportunities to Girls in Rural Egypt

**Ishraq: Safe Spaces to Learn, Grow and Play**

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“In Ishraq I learned to do things that were different from what I did all my life.”

**Rania, Ishraq participant**

At the start of the 21st century social and technological changes have opened opportunities for a healthier, more productive, and more fulfilling life. But, while opportunities exist, traditional structures prevent some people from taking advantage of them. In 1999 the first representative study reporting on the lives of Egyptian youth was published. It showed that while many of Egypt's youth were getting more education and finding new lives, one group, girls in rural, Upper Egypt, continued to be disproportionately disadvantaged. These girls were less likely to be attending school than boys, and most of those who were not in school had never had any formal schooling; early marriage remained a risk; female genital cutting (FGC) was widespread. Girls worked long hours in the house and in the fields. Fears of ruined reputations restricted their mobility. In short, while for most adolescents the years of transition from childhood to adulthood bring expanding opportunities, for many adolescent girls in rural Egypt it is just the opposite.

The concept of *Ishraq: Safe Spaces to Learn, Play and Grow* grew in response to the needs of out-of-school girls

in Egypt. Save the Children and the Population Council joined forces with CEDPA (Center for Development and Population Activities) and Caritas to create an innovative program consisting of training in literacy, life-skills and sports. All four of the NGO partners had significant experience of working with youth in the Egyptian context. The Population Council took responsibility for the research and for monitoring and evaluation of the project, along with offering technical assistance for the sports component. Save the Children used its ties to the Minya Governorate to meet the overall implementation needs. CEDPA provided its ground-breaking programs on gender-awareness, healthy living, and life-skills for both girls (*New Horizons*) and boys (*New Visions*). Caritas brought over two decades of experience in implementing its participatory literacy course *Learn to Be Free*.

Government agencies have also been associated with the program: these include the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Youth which provided a key contribution by creating 'girls-only' hours at the village Youth Centers, thus opening up a restricted space for the use of girls.

With the support of these partners, the Ishraq pilot project



began in four villages in the Minya Governorate of Egypt in August 2001. The primary focus was on out-of-school girls between the ages of 13 and 15, with additional programming targeting community leaders, parents and boys. Thus, Ishraq provided a holistic approach to changing the lives of adolescent girls. Classes teaching literacy, life-skills, and recreational sports met four times a week for three hours at a time. In February 2004, over a hundred girls graduated from the program, of which many have been mainstreamed into formal schooling. Our partner organizations are currently working closely with the Ministry of Youth and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood to expand the program to more governorates as a step to launching Ishraq on a national scale.

### Research Methodology

Internationally, the Population Council has worked on a number of intervention research projects for youth, testing the effectiveness of each innovation. As one of the initiators of the Ishraq program, we were in the enviable position of being able to include a rigorous impact assessment study design in the implementation of the program. A baseline survey of girls between the ages of 13 and 15 in the four intervention villages and two matched control sites was fielded before the launch of Ishraq. Midline data on participants were collected in 2003, followed by the endline survey of all the girls in February 2004. The quantitative work was complemented by qualitative research, mostly on the concerns and feelings of parents and boys. This article will highlight a selection of findings from the quantitative research, focusing on the effects of the Ishraq program on the girls' education levels, the advantages of an integrated approach, and changes in attitudes towards marriage, female genital cutting and family roles. The results of this study show that for illiterate girls on the verge of entering adulthood, intensive programs can produce important, measurable change.

### Education Levels

By comparing our baseline data with those of the endline collected after the completion of Ishraq we are able to contrast the background and achievements of the girls who participated against those who did not. Participation, however, is not a dichotomous variable. A number of girls who began the Ishraq program left before it ended, while others joined well after it started. Of the 587 girls interviewed in the endline survey, 310 never joined Ishraq, while 277 participated for at least some time. Of these 277 some stayed for just a few days or weeks whilst others attended for many months. Only 101 girls took part for the full duration of the program.

In the analysis that follows we will take two different approaches to participation: 1) use a five-category variable that measures length of participation (none, less

than six months, six-17 months, more than 18 months, and full program); 2) compare just the two extreme categories (none versus full program).

In Egypt, the main reason children do not get an education is that they never attend school at all. This was the case with the out-of-school girls in the six study villages. Overall, only about 18 percent had attended formal school at some time in the past. On the other hand, almost 72 percent of the interviewed girls had previously attended a literacy class. Although the girls who attended Ishraq were somewhat more likely to have attended school, and to have participated in other literacy classes before the advent of Ishraq, the differences are small, inconsistent, and not statistically significant. That is, Ishraq participants shared the same general educational background as other respondents in the sample villages.

In both the baseline and endline surveys we asked about a number of basic academic skills. These included:

1. writing her own name;
2. writing the name of a brother or sister;
3. writing the numbers from 1 to 10;
4. a simple math problem involving the computation of change from a purchase;
5. a second simple math problem involving computation of the distance a girl would walk to the fields;
6. reading a simple paragraph of just a couple of lines.

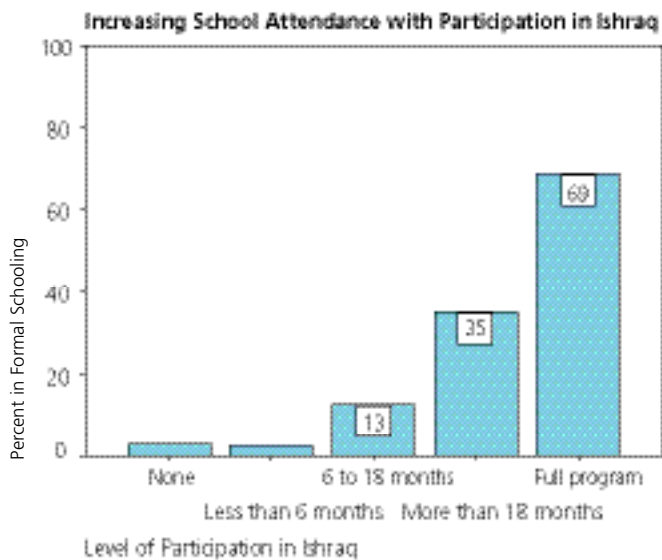
For each of these six indicators we have combined the baseline and endline data into a four-category variable:

1. had the skill at both the baseline and endline (KNOWS the skill);
2. did not have the skill at the baseline, but had it at the endline (LEARNed the skill);
3. had the skill at the baseline, but did not have it at the endline (FORGOT the skill);
4. did not have the skill at either the baseline or endline (Doesn't Know the skill - DK).

The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1. There are several points to notice. First, the participants in Ishraq were more likely to KNOW all of these skills, though only slightly more likely to KNOW the two math problems and the reading passage. Thus, despite the general equality in educational backgrounds of all the sample girls at the baseline, Ishraq participants were more likely to have these academic skills before they started the program. Next, except for writing her own name and solving one of the math problems (in both cases the skill level of full term participants was very high at baseline), Ishraq participants were more likely to LEARN the skill between the time of the baseline survey, and the endline. This is the expected outcome of the program—that girls will learn academic

skills through their participation. Learning is particularly strong for writing siblings' names and reading the simple passage. Finally, in all cases, Ishraq participants are less likely to have FORGOTTen the skill, or to have not known it at both the baseline and endline (DK).

The purpose of the Ishraq program was not simply to provide girls with basic literacy skills. Rather, one of the ultimate goals was to give participants the opportunity to return to formal education, entering the government school system at the first year of the preparatory (middle school) level. Those girls who stayed in Ishraq for the full program had a remarkable degree of success—69 percent of them were in formal education at the time of the endline survey. Moreover, the longer a girl remained in Ishraq the greater her chance of entering formal education.



Among the 31 girls who completed the full Ishraq program but who did not continue with their formal education, the main reason was that their family, or their hus-

band, refused to allow them to continue (47 percent). The second most important reason, however, was that the girl herself chose not to continue (23 percent).

Beyond academic skills and formal education, we asked the girls' knowledge of practical skills, such as making cheese and jam, sewing and needle work, and doing agricultural tasks, among other things. Interestingly, just as with academic skills, the Ishraq participants were generally more likely to have these skills before starting Ishraq. They were also much more likely to learn some of these skills (making jam, doing needle work, making art projects) between the time of the baseline and the endline surveys—see Table 2. Among the girls who learned these skills during of the course of the program, many (50-70 percent) reported learning from the Ishraq promoters, as a part of the Ishraq program itself. That is, Ishraq taught these girls not only basic academic skills, but also a number of practical skills they will be able to use throughout their lives.

While actual knowledge and behavior are the most important outcomes of a program such as Ishraq, we also asked a number of questions to gauge the girls' educational aspirations. These included the minimum amount of education needed for girls, and for boys, and then the highest level of education a girl, or a boy, could expect to reach. Girls gave similar responses whether they were asked about boys or girls, and their responses at the endline were similar to the answers they gave at the baseline. In all cases, secondary education was the modal category for the minimum education required, while university education was generally viewed as the highest attainable level of education. However, there were substantial shifts in the patterns of responses between the baseline and the endline surveys—and these shifts differed depending on whether the girl participated in the full Ishraq program, or never participated at all.

Among the girls who never participated there was actual-ly a slight decrease in the percentage of girls saying that

**Table 1: Possession of Basic Academic Skills Among Out-of-School Girls in Minya: Comparing Those Who Never Participated in Ishraq with Full Program Participants.**

Skill	Write Name		Sibs Name		Write 1-10		Math 1		Math 2		Read	
	None	Full	None	Full	None	Full	None	Full	None	Full	None	Full
Level of Participation in Ishraq												
Degree of Knowledge												
Knows (Base and End)	44.0%	85.0%	29.8%	55.0%	32.9%	69.0%	81.0%	84.5%	22.2%	26.0%	6.2%	11.1%
Learn (Not Base, but End)	14.3%	14.0%	14.1%	40.0%	16.3%	21.0%	13.1%	13.4%	21.5%	31.2%	12.7%	65.7%
Forgot (Base, not End)	7.5%	0.0%	4.6%	3.0%	7.5%	6.0%	3.9%	1.0%	17.9%	11.7%	4.2%	3.0%
DK (Neither Base nor End)	34.2%	1.0%	51.5%	2.0%	43.3%	4.0%	2.0%	1.0%	38.4%	31.2%	76.8%	20.2%



girls or boys need a minimum of secondary education, while conditional answers ('depends on the family', 'depends on the person's abilities') increased. Among girls who attended Ishraq for the full duration, on the other hand, the percent saying that secondary education was the minimum required generally increased, while those who accepted lower levels of education (primary/preparatory) declined. In the case of the girls' views of the highest level of education attainable, both girls who never participated and those who stayed for the full Ishraq program exhibited a substantial increase in the percent reporting that university education was possible. Most of the increase came from a decline in the number of girls giving conditional answers. However, among the full term participants, the level of increase in reports of university education was greater than the increase for non-participants, while those reporting that the highest attainable education was secondary school or less decreased substantially.

In sum, those who participated in Ishraq for the full duration of the program increased their aspirations to a greater degree than did those who did not participate at all.

#### Benefits of an Integrated Approach

As described above, Ishraq is a holistic program. Programmatically, the integrated approach is much more complicated than a single-focus structure, requiring close partnerships between NGOs with different experiences and working philosophies. One theory proposed in the conceptualization of the Ishraq project is that the integrated approach is more effective at meeting the goals of each component: In brief, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. With the breadth of the data collected on girls in both the intervention and the control villages, we now have evidence that this advantage does indeed exist.

We have mentioned that 310 of the girls interviewed at the endline had never participated in the Ishraq program.

However, half (155) of these 310 girls had participated in other literacy programs in the two years prior to the endline interview. We have included all these girls, whether they participated in another literacy program or not, in our "non-participants" category for the Ishraq analysis. However, it is worth looking at those girls who participated in other programs in somewhat greater detail to show how the results of a holistic program such as Ishraq differ from those of the more traditional "literacy only" programs.

On average, girls who participated in Ishraq, participated for much longer than did girls in other literacy programs (20 months versus nine months). More importantly, 47 percent of the girls who completed six or more months of Ishraq, were enrolled in school at the time of the endline survey, compared to just six percent of girls who were in other literacy programs for six or more months. Even if we consider just girls who were in Ishraq for six to 17 months, 13 percent, twice the level of other literacy program girls, were in school. The evidence suggests that the holistic Ishraq structure has a much greater impact on literacy and the educational progress of girls than do other literacy only programs.

#### Delaying Marriage

For many girls approaching their late teens in rural Egypt, marriage is a dominant concern. Marriage will define their transition from childhood to adulthood, and the choice of groom will shape their lives as adults. Parents are well aware of the belief that 'a girl is only as good as her reputation', and the pressure to make sure that a girl is safely married is ever-present. 'Safely married' may be something of a misnomer if girls are forced into unwanted marriages, are subject to female genital cutting (FGC) as is common in many Egyptian villages in preparation for marriage, or are married before they have attained physical maturity.

Table 2: Knowledge of Practical Skills Among Out-of-School Girls in Minya: Comparing Those Who Never Participated in Ishraq with Full Program Participants

Skill	Make Cheese		Make Jam		Sewing		Needle Work		Knit		Art		Agri Work	
	None	Full	None	Full	None	Full	None	Full	None	Full	None	Full	None	Full
Level of Participation in Ishraq														
Degree of Knowledge														
Knows (Base and End)	54.2%	70.0%	2.6%	6.0%	1.6%	6.0%	3.2%	7.0%	0.0%	1.0%	1.6%	8.0%	87.7%	93.0%
Learn (Not Base, but End)	18.1%	17.0%	6.8%	49.0%	5.2%	18.0%	10.7%	42.0%	1.9%	14.0%	6.1%	47.0%	4.2%	4.0%
Forgot (Base, not End)	11.9%	2.0%	2.6%	6.0%	4.2%	6.0%	5.2%	7.0%	0.6%	4.0%	1.3%	2.0%	5.5%	3.0%
DK (Neither Base nor End)	15.8%	11.0%	88.0%	39.0%	89.0%	70.0%	80.9%	44.0%	97.4%	81.0%	90.9%	43.0%	2.6%	0.0%

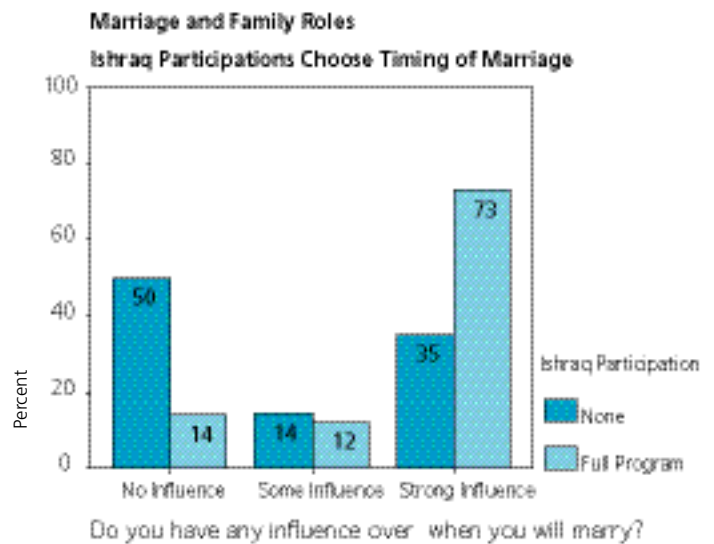


The Ishraq program encouraged girls to delay marriage past the legal age of 16 to allow time for education and physical and emotional maturity. Program promoters worked hard to convince parents to allow the participants to complete Ishraq, rather than pulling the girls out to marry. Indeed, completion of the program is strongly associated with delaying teenage marriages. This finding holds even after controlling for age, socioeconomic status, village and religion. Of the 61 married girls who never participated in Ishraq, eighteen report marrying before the age of 16. Just one girl who completed the Ishraq program reports marrying this young.

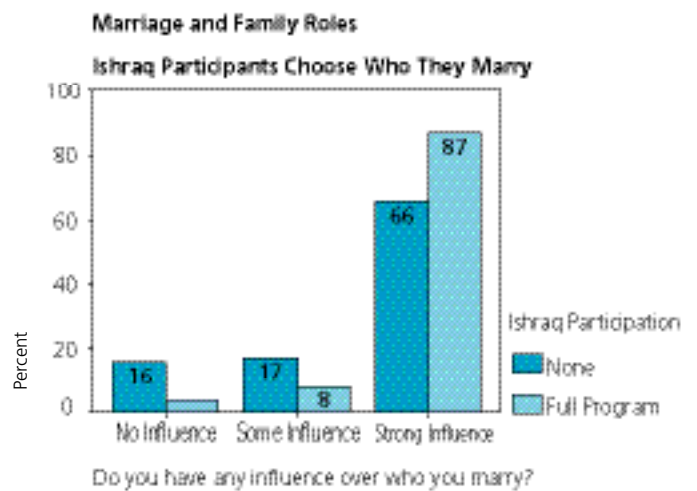


More generally, Ishraq participants also seem better able to influence decisions about marriage. In a society where marriages are made by families, rather than individuals, it can be unusual for girls to decide when and who they marry. Yet most Ishraq participants report a strong influence over the timing of marriage. Most non-participants, in contrast, report having no influence over when they will marry. Since this answer is based on the girls' assessment of their situations, it is difficult to tell if Ishraq participants truly have more influence or if they are just more likely to say so. It may be that they think they should have more influence, also an interesting development. Multivariate analysis that accounts for age, socioeconomic status, religion, and home village confirms the bivariate association between participation in Ishraq and perceived control over the timing of marriage.

Similarly, participation in Ishraq is also associated with reporting greater influence over the choice of a husband. Using a statistical test to account for age, socioeconomic status, religion and home village shows a robust association between participation in Ishraq and the likelihood of a response of 'I have/had a strong influence on the choice of my husband'. Again this information is based on statements of the girls, but taken together with the data on influence on timing of marriage it seems that

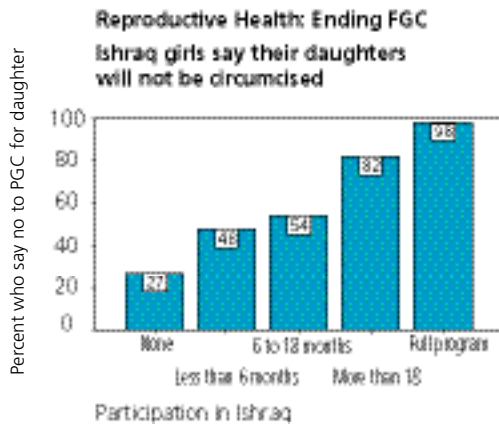


participation in Ishraq has increased participants' confidence in their ability to be involved in major decisions about their lives.

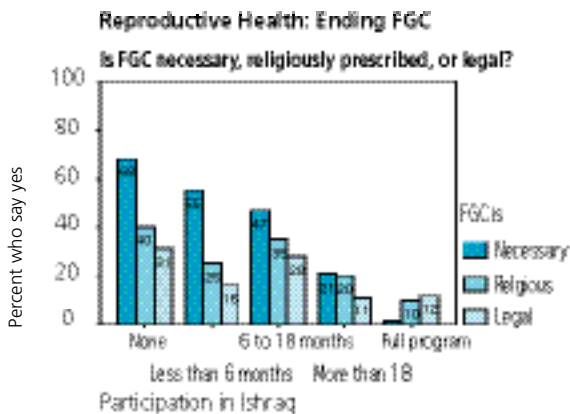


### Female Genital Cutting

One of the main threats associated with marriage in rural Egypt is female genital cutting (FGC). Estimates vary as to the percentage of adult woman who have experienced FGC, but most statistics range from 80-95 percent. Villages have different traditions regarding when FGC takes place; some do it when the girls are very young, others when she enters puberty, and others directly before nuptials—in preparation for marriage. The Ishraq curriculum talked about the dangers of FGC to women's health, and also argued that it was neither necessary nor religiously prescribed, as is sometimes believed. While full term Ishraq participants are less likely than non-participants to be circumcised, the difference is small (51 percent versus 60 percent, respectively) and not statistically significant once other personal charac-



teristics are controlled. (Marriage, as expected, is very strongly associated with experience in FGC in the multivariate analysis.)



This result is not surprising. FGC is not initiated by the girl herself; generally it is the family who wants her to have it done. Attitudes, in contrast, towards FGC are strikingly different. Ishraq participants are much less likely to think that FGC is necessary for girls, religiously mandated, or legal. In multivariate analysis accounting for other factors, this relationship is statistically significant, with participation in Ishraq joining socioeconomic levels as strongly linked to the girls' attitudes towards FGC.

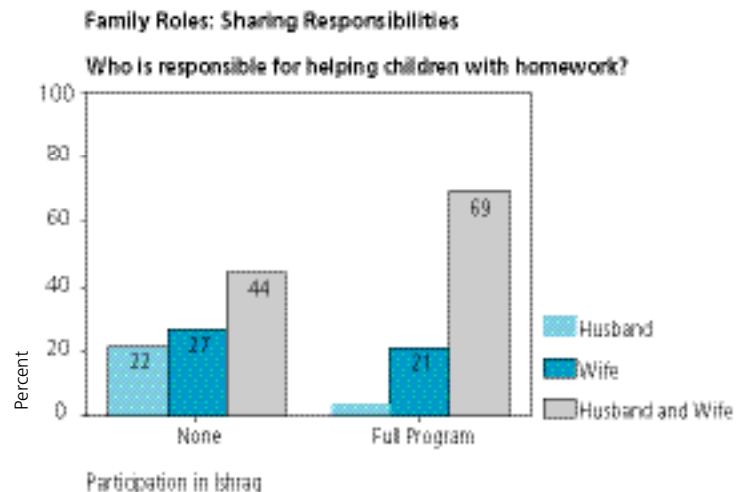
Translating these attitudes into decreasing the prevalence of FGC occurring is the next challenge. We asked the respondents if they were planning on subjecting their future daughters to FGC. There is a clear connection between participation in Ishraq and stating that their future daughters will not be circumcised. Even a short participation in the program of less than six months is strongly associated with this feeling. This strong association at every level of exposure to Ishraq remains statistically significant when using

multivariate analysis to account for village residence, age, marital status, socioeconomic status and religion. Mothers are often involved in the decision to circumcise their daughters; indeed, about 95 percent of all respondents believe they will have at least some influence over this decision. This change in attitude, therefore, may have positive long-term consequences for ending the practice of FGC in the beneficiaries' families.

### Family Roles

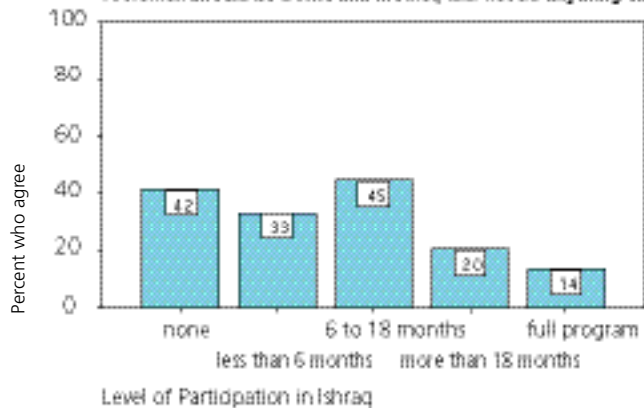
Grounded in the family, rural Egyptian society regards the role of women as largely remaining within the house. Family roles, therefore, are dominant forces in defining the identities, activities and lives of women. We will now look at the respondents' attitudes towards the division of responsibilities and roles within a household.

While the traditional roles of women in cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children remain strong in the minds of our respondents, Ishraq participants consistently indicate a desire for sharing responsibilities with men. Most reject the idea that a woman's responsibilities as a wife and mother preclude her from other activities. Compared to non-participants, girls who have attended the full Ishraq program are more likely to believe that a husband and a wife should share responsibility for a given task. Childcare, for instance, remains firmly in the sphere of women's work, yet helping children with their homework is increasingly seen as something that should be shared between fathers and mothers. Physically buying food is generally thought to be a woman's responsibility, although almost a quarter of the Ishraq full-time participants believe it should be shared between the couple. Most strikingly, Ishraq participants are much more likely to believe that husbands and wives should share responsibility for household expenses. This may indicate an increased optimism about the girls' earning potential in the first place—if women can't earn money then sharing responsibility for expenses seems unsustainable.



**Family Roles: Expanding Roles of Women**

"A woman should be a wife and mother, and not do anything else."

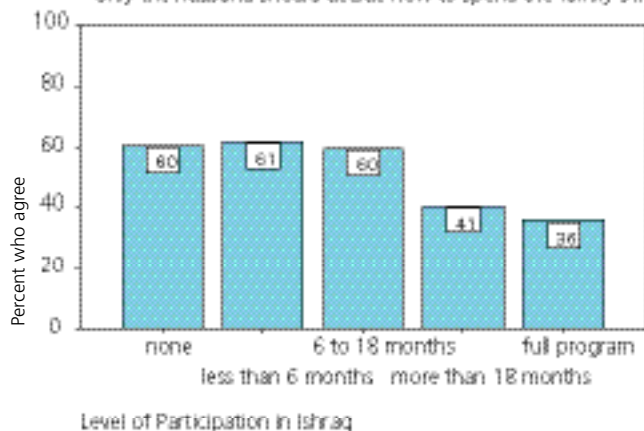


In a series of questions about the roles of various members of the family, Ishraq participants consistently responded with answers indicating a sense of equality between men and women, and boys and girls. The general trend of answers shows that the longer a girl attended Ishraq, the more likely she is to support an equal division of labor within the household. The data indicates, however, that for a strong effect the girls needed to be in the program for at least 18 months; the following bar charts show similar answers from respondents with less than 18 months of exposure to Ishraq, with a noticeable difference for those with more.

While most girls believe that working women should be able to expect help with childcare from their husbands, every single Ishraq graduate felt this way. This result is interesting when coupled with the results of a question showing that 96 percent of non-participants and 87 percent of full time participants believe that taking care of children is an exclusive responsibility.

**Family Roles: Sharing Responsibilities**

"Only the husband should decide how to spend the family's money"



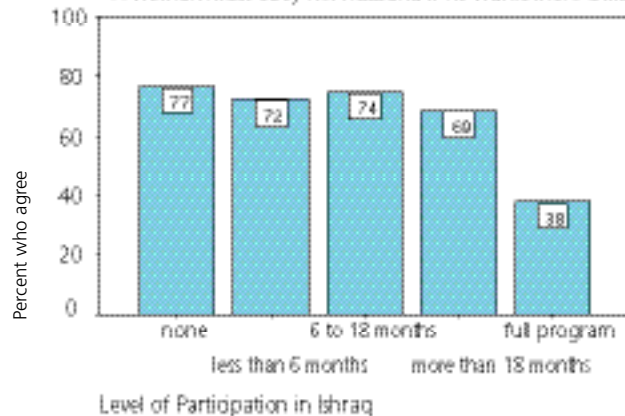
In addition, Ishraq participants are not only more likely to believe that woman should be able to work outside of the house, but they also think that they should be part of the decisions about how to spend the family's money.

Full term Ishraq participants believe they should contribute to decisions about the size of their families while girls with less exposure to the program tend to say that the husband has the final say in this decision. Moreover, 82 percent of Ishraq participants report wanting just two children. This could create conflict if the husband wants more children, but the wife believes she should play a role in the decision.

In as much as Ishraq is responsible for participants desiring greater input into family decisions, the right to work outside the home, and greater equality in their relationship with the men in their lives, the program may also be increasing their frustration with the existing definitions of their lives. Social change is a difficult and gradual process. Programmatically Ishraq should address the girls' ability not just to desire change but to negotiate for it as well.

**Family Roles: Deciding Family Size**

"A woman must obey her husband if he wants more children"



**Conclusion**

We have presented here a small selection of the findings of the impact assessment of the Ishraq program. Yet even with just the short description of the results included in this article it is clear that the project has positively affected the girls' attitudes and lives. We are currently working on expanding the project to reach hundreds of other girls facing the real threats of early marriage, life-long illiteracy, and restricted lives. A growing body of literature points to the importance of the period of adolescence in the trajectory of people's lives. This is of particular interest to the Middle East and North Africa region where an estimated 19 percent of the population is between the ages of 15 and 24. We hope that this study contributes to the debate on effective program design and implementation for youth.