A Population Council pilot to get girls back into school has changed the lives of over 3000 girls to date and, after more than 12 years, continues to grow and inspire.

By Sara Romany
Photography by Hayssam Samir
In late 2012 Malala Yousafzai made international headlines after surviving an assassination attempt by the Taliban. The young Pakistani blogger was willing to lose her life and almost did, fighting for her education. Militants attacked her school bus and shot at her and two other girls to send a clear and loud message to the Pakistani villagers: Girls do not belong in schools, girls belong in their homes where they can serve their families and husbands.

While some Cairenes might be horrified at Malala’s story and Pakistan’s extremist tendencies, what many fail to see is that when it comes to girls and education, a similar mentality is alive and well not only in our suburbs and villages, it’s slowly creeping in on most Egyptian cities.

Aiming to fight the wave is the Population Council’s Ishraq program for out-of-school girls in rural and Upper Egypt. The program was designed following a study conducted by the Population Council in 1997 which showed that 25% of Egyptian girls in rural areas either drop out of school or do not enroll in the first place. What’s more, the study revealed, the schoolgirls are isolated, marginalized, and more likely to get married early and subsequently have children early, which in turn increases the mortality rate. Perhaps more shocking is the correlation between a high illiteracy rate and potential sexual and gender-based violence.

The Population Council decided to take immediate action to alter these girls’ lives by empowering them with an education. In 2001 Ishraq, a multi-dimensional program for 12-to-15-year-old out-of-school girls, was born. In collaboration with local NGOs and international groups such as CEDPA, Save the Children and Caritas, Ishraq began to offer an education to girls who dropped out of or never started school in hopes that these girls would be able to go back and join a normal school upon completion of the program.

Dr. Nahla Abdel Tawab, Population Council country director, says Ishraq faced many challenges just getting the girls into a classroom — the families of the girls being the biggest obstacle. “It was considered a taboo for girls to leave the house,” says Abdel Tawab, who explains that many parents in rural Egypt would rather keep their girls at home where they can control them and keep them in the dark about their basic rights.

The Ishraq classes are held in youth convention centers in the villages, premises that are mostly if not totally devoted to young men, and convincing parents to send their daughters there was almost impossible when the program was first launched. Not to be deterred, leaders employed different methods to get through to the girls’ families. Their attempts ranged from employing prominent figures in each village to convince the parents to getting Ishraq teachers to go door to door to persuade parents that nothing bad will come out of education.

And they prevailed. “Now parents have changed; they are interested and keen on sending their girls to the Ishraq program. They are finally proud of their girls,” says Abdel Tawab enthusiastically. “There is a shift in the way they think and the way they view girls. Initially they only see girls as future wives and mothers but now they see them as much more; they even consider a career for their girls.”

Both Abdel Tawab and Dr. Khaled El Said, Ishraq program director, believe the key to getting more Egyptian girls into the education system is to create a more encouraging atmosphere for them to go to school. To create this safe haven for the girls, El Said argues that religious institutions should address misconceptions about girls’ education and the status of women in society. “Religious institutes have a strong hold now more than ever on Egyptian societies,” he says. “In these villages whatever the sheikh says has to be done.”

Nahla Abdel Tawab has seen a shift in how rural families view their daughters’ future.
to a report issued by the Population Council in May. The report adds: “Ishraq has helped them make the transition into school, build community participation skills and knowledge of legal rights, and address their economic needs.”

It has also given them hope for a better future and confidence in themselves. Said tells of the lengths girls go to now to join the Ishraq program. He remembers one girl who had leukemia and whose only wish was to join the program. Even with her illness as a hindrance and her awareness that her disease might take her life in a few years, she was determined to get an education. She joined the program and was an excellent student. Sadly she lost her battle with cancer just a few months after joining the program.

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In fact El Said is concerned that what creates even bigger problems is that many of these so-called sheikhs are not necessarily qualified and often “carry misconceptions about Islam to these small societies. This is true to all aspects of our life in Egypt today, where ‘sheikhs’ seem to mislead the masses in all aspects of life from politics to economics.”

Abdel Tawab notes that another problem that arises from “preachers” disregarding women’s status in society is harassment. According to her, many girls are harassed in schools or on their way to school, which leads to high dropout rates and of course emotional and social distress. She calls on the media to intervene to correct the negative false image of women.

To date, the Ishraq program has helped change the lives of 3,321 girls in 54 of the most disadvantaged villages in Egypt, according to a report issued by the Population Council in May. The report adds: “Ishraq has helped them make the transition into school, build community participation skills and knowledge of legal rights, and address their economic needs.”

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ABOUT ISHRAQ

The Population Council report, issued last May, describes the Ishraq program as a combination of “traditional tested program elements (literacy, life skills, nutrition) with more innovative ones (sports, financial education). […] Program staff focus on building a multi-layered platform to support and institutionalize the program by educating and mobilizing communities around issues of importance to adolescent girls, forging partnerships between international NGOs, government institutions and local NGOs, and building capacities of local facilitators and partners. […] The program seeks to transform girls’ lives by working with girls, communities, and government. In working directly with the girls, it aims to foster their self-awareness and build their self-confidence. It establishes girl-friendly “safe spaces” where they can gather, make friends, and learn; works to improve girls’ functional literacy, cognitive skills, reproductive health-related knowledge and attitudes, and awareness of their rights; encourages continued schooling; and lays a foundation for citizenship. Through its work at the community level, the program seeks to change gender norms and community perceptions about girls’ roles in society, bringing them into the public sphere and raising awareness of issues that affect them. In its collaboration with the government, Ishraq works to increase local and national policymakers’ support for girl-friendly measures and policies.

For more information on the program, visit www.popcouncil.org/projects/40_IshraqSafeSpacesGirls.asp
man Ibrahim never received her secondary education but with hard work and dedication, the 40-year-old teacher has managed to build a respected reputation among her fellow teachers. Ibrahim, who works with the Ishraq project as a mentor to the schoolgirls, recalls how she hated the teaching system and the way teachers treated their students. “I wish people would understand the fact that a teacher’s qualifications are not merely the certificates they receive, teaching has less to do with giving information and more to do with how to help students receive it,” says Ibrahim who says that Ishraq was a life-changing experience. Ibrahim hopes to see the project, whose aim is to unify towns like Al-Azizya with the rest of Egypt through education and ensure equality and homogeneity within, institutionalized by the government.

Ali Farouk Migawer was never against his daughter, Dalia, getting an education. But after her harsh experience in public school, the girl herself refused to go back and, with her consent, Migawer pulled her out of the system.

“She would come home terrified of the teacher who would slap the students across the face. She was neither able to neither read nor write, but since she joined Ishraq, I’ve seen great progress,” says Migawer, who was one of the very few parents who welcomed the idea of letting girls into the school system. He was very encouraging and supportive of Dalia, who is now 14, and her siblings. “I want to see her become a doctor someday.”

The Ishraq project has not only had a positive impact on its students, it has given hope to the entire village, says Elham Seddik, one of Ishraq’s dedicated mentors. Seddik, a housewife who bred...
chickens, jumped at the chance of a part-time job and says her experience helped her develop her skills, so she could help students develop their own.

Donia Srour is one of the many girls who were pulled out of school to work at the town’s factory. Now 15, she was thrilled at the opportunity to learn how to read and write. She recalls how she made a deal with her “quite stubborn” father upon leaving her job at the factory and the monthly LE 200 salary so she could attend Ishraq classes five times a week. She promised to hand over a monthly stipend, which she saved from the aid package Ishraq granted her. “My father said he found this fair enough as we would both benefit.”

Shaimaa Farag Salem is one of the mentors at the Ishraq classes in Manshiet Al-Gammal village. She joined with high hopes for all the girls in the village and wanted to prepare them for secondary school. “I accompanied them to the third prep exam; I waited hours until they finished the test and spent another hour reviewing the exam sheet with them. They all passed,” recalls Salem.

Randa Maher Abdelrazik, 16, also wanted to stay home after teachers at her public school hit her and her classmates and would often ignore her when she tried to participate in class. “I hated school with all my heart, I did not want to learn how to read and write,” says Abdelrazik. “It wasn’t just the teachers, it was my uncle, he would also beat me if I talked to any of my colleagues. He’d escort me and wait until I finished classes.” Abdelrazik later came to love learning when she joined Ishraq, going on to receive an honors certificate for her extracurricular and academic achievements.

Soheir Atef, a 15-year-old student in the village of Azizya, was pulled out of school to become engaged. At the behest of her teacher Elham, who believed it was necessary for her to finish her basic education, Atef agreed to join Ishraq. Atef never regretted her decision and says she has learned so many things that she is now able to think of a future for her children whom she will allow to finish school.

“I will continue with my education, I’ll take the third prep exam. Secondary school? No my fiance doesn’t agree.”