

# Ishraq: Safe Spaces to Learn, Play and Grow

A 3-year intervention research project for out-of-school girls in four villages in Minya, Upper Egypt

Briefing Sheet #6

July 2004

## LETTING GIRLS PLAY: BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS IN RURAL EGYPT THROUGH SPORTS

Since August of 2001, *Ishraq* has been providing out-of-school adolescent girls with safe spaces to learn, play, and grow. In addition to offering literacy and life skills, the program empowers a new generation of young girls through opportunities for sports and recreation.

*Ishraq's* sports component is an innovative intervention in traditional rural communities. The program promotes the rights of girls and women to full participation in all aspects of public life, including sports and physical education. UNESCO's (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) Charter of Physical Education and Sport states:

*"One of the essential conditions for the effective exercise of human rights is that everyone should be free to develop and preserve his or her physical, intellectual, and moral powers, and that access to physical education and sports should consequently be assured and granted for all human beings".*

### RATIONALE FOR INCLUDING SPORTS IN ISHRAQ

Recent research in Upper Egypt has found that young out-of-school girls in rural areas suffer from particularly low self-esteem, describing themselves as "ignorant" and "doing nothing" with their lives. By increasing opportunities for these girls, *Ishraq* is helping them toward a self-image that is capable and confident.

The program is also designed to increase gender equity by encouraging and promoting the participation of rural females in sports. In most rural communities, sports clubs and associations are dominated by males. By challenging traditional concepts of gender-appropriate behavior, *Ishraq* is

changing how girls think about themselves and how their communities perceive them.

**IMPACT:** More than half of the participating girls said that without the sports component, they would not have enjoyed the classroom aspects of the program as much: *"the program would be boring without sports"*.

### The objectives of the sports program are designed to ensure that participating girls:

- 1- Have fun in a safe and activity-based environment;
- 2- Enhance feelings of self-worth and self-confidence;
- 3- Acquire skills in a wide range of recreational activities;
- 4- Learn information and attitudes to help them live healthier lives;
- 5- Maintain mental and physical health; and
- 6- Develop lasting friendships.

### CHALLENGES TO RURAL GIRLS' PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

Introducing the concept of sports for adolescent girls in traditional, rural communities of Egypt is an unprecedented challenge. These communities are accustomed to seeing only boys engage in sports, and sports infrastructures are more supportive of male than female participation. Therefore, in order to facilitate community acceptance of a female sports program, it was necessary to integrate sports with other valued program contents, such as literacy and life skills.

The Population Council and Save the Children Egypt have jointly designed an intervention and impact study for out-of-school girls (aged 13 to 15) in rural Minya. A range of partners have been brought on board to enhance the life opportunities of these girls, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Youth, CARITAS, the Center for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

In a recent *Ishraq* study, girls expressed the concerns they experienced in participating in a sports program for the first time:

- Lack of support from some family and community members
- Being teased by boys who felt that sports were not appropriate for girls
- The novelty of wearing a training suit
- The importance of playing sports in a protected, enclosed area.

### SIGNS OF CHANGE

These rural adolescent girls have been successful in overcoming obstacles to their participation in sports and are looking forward to an active life for themselves and their daughters:

- 95% of participants said they would encourage other girls to play sports and 99% will encourage their daughters to play sports.

- 95% said boys are wrong in believing that girls can't play sports.
- 88% said that sports changed them positively, as they now feel healthier, have social confidence, increased self-esteem, have developed new friendships, and are more active.

*"I feel good when playing with my girlfriends, because I did not have friends before"* said a 16 years-old *Ishraq* participant.



Photo by: Nadia Zibani

## SPORTS FEDERATIONS AS NEW PROJECT PARTNERS

The International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) and the Egyptian Table Tennis Association (ETTA) have become important partners in the promotion of girls' rights to sports in Egypt. Through ETTA, Egypt's Minister of Youth has generously donated thirty table tennis tables to *Ishraq*. As a result, table tennis was selected as the individual sport activity in addition to another team-sport (basket-ball, volley-ball, or hand-ball) for the expanded recreational sports program of *Ishraq*.

In March 2003, ITTF, with its Egyptian counterpart ETTA, offered a 3-day introductory training course to twenty classroom promoters and sports trainers (males and females). This event was highly appreciated by the project staff and the community at large who attended this successful event. Training was based on the international program called "*BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS WITH TABLE TENNIS BALLS*".

ITTF "EVERY TABLE IS A TABLE TENNIS TABLE"



Photo by: Nadia Zibani

In March 2004, a documentary film about the *Ishraq* project was presented at the 2nd International Women's Forum organized by ITTF during the World Table Tennis Team Championships in Qatar, (1st - 7th March 2004).

The *Ishraq* documentary film has also been selected for presentation during the Sports Movies & TV 2004/22nd International Festival held in Milan later in 2004. This video has won world-wide support for increasing girls' opportunities to play and to participate in their societies. (It may be seen at [www.popcouncil.org/me/middle\\_east.html](http://www.popcouncil.org/me/middle_east.html).)

## ISHRAQ: A MODEL FOR INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Internationally, there is increased attention to girls' participation in sports, as evidenced by the emergence of new legal and policy frameworks in this area. Developing countries and their ministries of youth and sports may have policies that acknowledge equal rights, access, and opportunities for youth,

however few of these policies are implemented in rural settings.

The *Ishraq* integrated learning and sports program is the first of its kind in the Middle East. Lessons learned from the pilot phase are now being applied in a large-scale expansion of the program, in partnership with Egypt's National Council for Childhood and Motherhood and the Ministry of Youth. Of particular interest will be tracking the early *Ishraq* graduates in order to understand the longer term impacts on the lives of rural girls.

### KEY LESSONS LEARNED:

- 1- Ensure early on that beneficiaries' parents and community at large have a good understanding of the sports program;
- 2- Target an age bracket that is not too old for girls to play—11 to 14 may be ideal;
- 3- Select times and days of play in collaboration with participants;
- 4- Choose a facility that is within walking distance from their homes;
- 5- Ensure that girls feel safe from the fear of being harassed by boys and men while they play, thereby protecting their dignity and reputations;
- 6- In conservative settings, ensure that girls play only with girls, at least in the beginning;
- 7- Select locally recruited young women to serve as sports promoters;
- 8- Introduce sports in a friendly, non-threatening environment and keep the program simple.



**For further information on**  
**Safe Spaces to Learn, Play and**  
**Grow (Ishraq),**  
**please contact Abeer Salem at:**  
**asalem@pccairo.org**