Evaluating the Impact of the Ishraq Program in Egypt

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1. Motivation and Outline:

The purpose of the proposed paper is to assess the impact of Ishraq, a second-chance informal education program for out-of-school adolescent girls in rural Upper Egypt. The program is implemented by the Population Council in collaboration with other partners and took place in 30 villages in the governorates of Fayoum, Souhag and Qena covering 1800 girls. The program provides literacy and life skills over a period of two years. Studies employing rigorous impact evaluation are scant in the MENA region.

2. Methodology and Analysis:

Participation in the program is voluntary resulting in a potential selection bias. The original Ishraq evaluation plan entailed an experimental design whereby it was planned to randomly select control and Ishraq (treatment/intervention) villages. Randomization was therefore planned to take place at the level of villages rather than participants. However, this was not possible due to the fact that the pool of villages that satisfied the program village selection criteria was hardly sufficient to meet the number of villages/participants to which we were committed to cover.\(^1\)

Instead, an innovation was to use the propensity score matching to identify control villages matching Ishraq villages in terms of relevant characteristics which include population size, poverty level and prevalence of girls’ education. Baseline and endline data was collected by the Population Council in intervention villages for both Ishraq participants and non-participants. Data in control villages was collected only at endline. The evaluation method that will mainly be used in the paper is propensity score matching where Ishraq girls are matched to similar girls in other groups at endline. The set of possible comparisons are listed below:

1. Comparison of all girls in control villages and all girls in intervention villages, without a distinction between treated and untreated girls (intent to treat analysis). This has the advantage of overcoming selection bias.
2. Comparison of treated and untreated girls in intervention villages.
3. Pre- post comparison of treated girls’
4. Comparison of treated girls with (untreated) control girls

\(^1\) To ensure feasibility of implementation, the two main village selection criteria were: having a sufficient number of girls eligible to join the program (at least 60 girls aged 12-15 that are out-of-school) and having a Youth Center YC in an appropriate condition to host the program. In addition, in each governorate, the 10 villages had to be clustered in 2 districts for local implementing NGOs to be able to oversee the daily implementation of the program.
(5) Comparison of untreated girls in intervention villages with (untreated) girls in control villages

(6) Propensity score matching combined with difference-in-differences analysis for the panel sample in intervention villages.

Additionally, the IV method will be used where the instrument is the distance to the youth center YC, where the program is housed, as it proxies cost of participation. The distance to the village center is used to capture access to other services and the effect of the centrality of the household location.

A set of attitudinal and knowledge outcomes is used to measure the impact of Ishraq: (1) improvement in girls’ functional literacy, (2) mobility and access to safe social spaces, (3) acquisition of life skills, including financial literacy skills, knowledge of hygiene, general health, puberty changes and reproductive health, and participation in sports, and (4) empowerment-related outcomes including attitudes toward gender roles and marriage, knowledge of women’s rights and basic civic facts, attitudes toward FGM, self-esteem and participation in decision-making.

3. Policy Implications:

Earlier work has shown that the gender gap in education in Egypt mainly occurs at school entry. Girls are significantly less likely than boys to be sent to school. Once sent to school, however, girls are not less likely to exit school. They are also not less likely to receive other forms of investment in education such as private schooling or private tutoring. Accordingly, non-formal education programs providing the girls who missed education with literacy skills are crucial to close gender gaps in education. A girl-only program is often necessary particularly in regions such as Upper Egypt. The impact of these programs needs to be evaluated so that the most effective programs/program components are identified. It is important to sustain the effective programs and have them scaled-up and adopted by the governorate at the regional and national level.