



Adolescent Boys' Response to Gender Equitable Programming in Rural Upper Egyptian Villages: Between 'Ayb'¹ and *Haram*²

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In the Middle East, as elsewhere, gender roles are transformed in response to a number of influences. The changing socioeconomic conditions in much of the Arab world have created economic disparities, and, at the same time, have meant an increased participation of women in the labor force in many countries. These changes, along with the overall increase in female education, have threatened the "traditional" organization of households and are beginning to redefine female space and boundaries (Ali 1996).

Changing patterns of production and reproduction are also indicative of changes in gender relations which challenge traditional images and expectations associated with men's - as well as women's - roles, such as those of breadwinner, care giver, or head of household. These developments increasingly call for a re-assessment of the roles and responsibilities of women and men, of stereotypical and traditional gender roles, and of existing power relations between women and men.

Inequality in gender relations is often considered a given of society and culture, and rarely questioned as to how it is maintained, perpetuated, or changed. Kandiyotti (1994) attempts to provide greater depth to the

homogenous representation of male behavior and masculinity and discusses the notion of dominant (hegemonic) and subordinate masculinities in Muslim and Middle East societies. She places the production of masculine identity in generational and institutional terms and shows how masculinities are produced and altered as men move through their life cycles. For example, when the older men of the household are absent, the mother and sisters of a young man may jokingly treat him as the "man of the house". While in the presence of his father and older brothers, a young boy retains a position inferior to the older women of the family. Accordingly, masculinity is continuously negotiated in Egyptian society.

In patriarchal systems, such as those of rural Egyptian villages, boys begin to enjoy status and privileges afforded to adult men; they gain more autonomy, mobility, and opportunity for engagement in public life than do girls. With these expanding privileges comes a taken-for-granted assumption that men have authority over women and children. Despite this, we posit that these gender norms are increasingly dysfunctional for young men, given new social and economic realities in Arab and Muslim societies.

Moreover, as development organizations increase their attention to girls, through awareness-raising, empowerment, and opportunities to engage outside their homes, how do boys respond to such developments in their communities? Does it change boys' perspective on girls' roles, and if so, in what direction? Despite the global proliferation of development activities targeting and enlisting youth, a review of the international literature yields little information about how adolescent boys respond to emerging opportunities for girls. Mainstream literature has largely concentrated on the health and development of adolescent boys, and on the construction of masculinity among adult men, and we find no published articles on adolescent boys' notions of masculinity in the Middle East. Our contribution may be to extend the insights of the literature to account for the unique challenges facing adolescent boys and their lived reality as they are socialized into becoming young men.

The Setting

An experimental social development program aimed at improving life choices for out-of-school adolescent girls in Upper Egypt³ provides an interesting lens through which we can begin to explore these questions. The ISHRAQ program based in four rural villages of Al Minya governorate of Upper Egypt piloted a holistic package of education, skills building, and sports activities aimed at 13-15 year old girls. Program implementers realized that building girls' skills and sense of agency will go only so far if girls find themselves in the same restrictive environments - that is - ones in which the institutions of patriarchy remove young women from direct public participation. Boys are particularly important in this regard, as their behavior in public spaces and in the home bears strongly on girls' mobility and participation in public life, and because boys are the future husbands and partners of the girls in the program. Thus, recognizing the gate keeping role boys and parents play vis-à-vis girls, interventions with both groups have also been piloted.⁵ Through this comprehensive approach, the program hopes to begin to change norms surrounding what is acceptable for adolescent girls while at the same time redressing gender inequity. To do so, the engagement of men and boys in achieving gender equality requires greater attention to gender stereotypes and expectations about men's roles and responsibilities, and how these expectations influence male behavior.

Data Sources

This paper analyses the experiences of adolescent boys and young men aged 13-19 living in rural communities in which the ISHRAQ empowerment program for girls was launched. Qualitative research was conducted to explore boys' notions of masculinity and male roles, as well as their perception of girls' evolving roles in their

communities. Through the use of focus group discussion (FGD) methodology we sought to understand boys' views of girls' place in community and home life, and their opinions of the ISHRAQ program itself and the girls who participate in it. A total of twenty-two FGDs were carried out in six villages with 170 (6) boys and young men aged 13-19 in six villages. The discussion groups were held at local youth centers. Trained moderators conducted FGDs which were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed, using standard research techniques. There were very few groups comprised of younger out-of-school boys as most boys between 13-15 years of age were in school. We anticipated differences in responses between groups of in school versus out-of-school boys - hypothesizing that better-educated boys may hold more progressive views towards girls - but we did not find this to be the case. We did find, not surprisingly, that focus group discussions with younger boys were more challenging to conduct and revealed less sophisticated understanding of the topics compared with older boys.

Boys' Notions of Manhood and Masculinity

In this section, we explore notions of masculinity amongst rural Egyptian adolescent boys. Although this did not form an explicit aspect of the original research, the opportunity to explore these concepts within a broader research and program context presented itself.

In order to develop effective intervention programs and policies to empower rural girls, it is vital to study the attitudes and behaviors of adolescent males and to understand how boys' notions of masculinity affect girls and young women. There is ample international evidence suggesting that versions of masculinity or manhood that young men adhere to, or are socialized into, have important implications for their health and that of other young men, as well as for the young women around them.

In an effort to identify norms and behaviors deemed critical for boys and young men to function in communities characterized by distinct and segregated roles for men and women, we must first understand the meanings, perceptions, attributes and factors influencing boys' notions of masculinity.

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Boys' Understanding of Masculinity

The field of masculinities is beginning to shed light on how boys are socialized into prevailing norms about what is socially acceptable "masculine" behavior in a given setting, and how boys' adherence to these prevailing norms can sometimes have negative consequences for their health and development. As in many societies, families and culture promote a type of masculinity that is achievement and action-oriented, and outwardly directed with the explicit or implicit goal that boys should become providers and protectors. Thus the understanding of masculinity involves an analysis of important characteristics and roles such as provider and protector which are linked to the constructs of power and control. We found this to be the case within this group of boys. At a young age, boys are socialized to be aggressive and competitive - qualities which are deemed necessary for their future roles as providers and protectors. Our data illuminated how notions of masculinity and gendered division of roles and responsibilities are constructed. We explore the various connotations of masculinity and how boys perceive themselves in relation to their own notions of masculinity.

Masculine Roles and Responsibilities: Providers and Protectors

To understand how boys think about male roles as currently prescribed, it is important to identify the markers of masculinity which are deemed important for boys and men such

as: conduct, responsibility, and privilege. Almost unanimously, boys' definition of manhood is described as "someone who works, earns, and spends". According to many respondents, particularly among the educated boys, a man is "the head of the household who spends money"; "someone who shoulders responsibilities"; "who works in the field or any other job". Further they added, "husbands must prevent their wives from going to work because we do not want people to say that wives are spending money on the house"; "boys are responsible

financially for the house"; "I can bring money but not girls". The role of being the provider - which was universally understood as being a hard worker, resulting in earning money - emerged as critical to boys' understanding of masculinity.

According to most respondents, the essential task in performing the provider role is to ensure that girls and

women do not have to go out to work: "A man is someone who earns and a girl does the housework". This conception of masculinity results in a clear division of gender roles, and is then linked to girls' education. Most boys felt that boys need to be educated because they must fulfill their role as providers while girls, whose primary role is to perform domestic work, are in less need of education. Thus, boys endorsed the restriction on girls' education which they felt was justified because of the domestic responsibilities girls carry: "girls are used to staying at home so that they can do the house work"; "girls help their mothers at home and boys go to the club"; "the girl can look after her younger siblings"; "if there is something she (a girl) does not want to do, she has to do it by force".

In the domestic sphere, adolescent boys' perception of the man's role as protector is strongly expressed. In this regard, boys define a man as essentially someone who makes decisions and takes care of the family. Concerning men as protectors, boys' definition is someone who "has a word in marriage matters"; "the oldest in the family"; and about taking care of the family someone who "takes over responsibility when the father is away"; "someone who helps his parents and siblings financially".

In the public sphere and as brothers, their conception of masculinity is related to that of protector, and is also closely linked to being courageous and taking part in issues that concern their sisters such as protecting them from harassment. Closely linked to the need to protect girls is the need to control them. Even among younger boys, most felt that a girl has to be controlled and kept at home: "girls are born to stay at home"; "in our rural villages, people talk about girls who go out"; "if a girl is out they (people) will say that she is a loose girl (meaning with no parents)". Therefore, girls are not supposed to leave their homes alone.

Another important aspect of masculinity which emerged was that of control. Masculinity requires a boy or young man to exercise control over his sister. When asking adolescent boys about their responsibilities towards their female siblings, boys' expression of masculinity is closely linked to controlling their sisters and fulfilling their roles as gatekeepers. As such, brothers have the responsibility to control their sisters by "bringing her (my sister) from wherever she is"; "taking her (my sister) out with me with the permission granted from my parents"; "helping her choose her friends"; "controlling her"; "protecting her"; "not beating her"; "watching out to ensure that she (my sister) does not go out with a boy". In addition, and in reference to their sisters boys spoke of "allowing her to be educated" and "finishing her studies". Kandiyotti argues that for most men in the Middle East,

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the construction of masculine ideals is based on power. Part of this power is related to the ability of men to control women in "public" and "private" domains thus masculinities created on this are likely to be on increasingly unstable terrain. In many settings notions of masculinity for adult men often rely on sexual power and relationships are intrinsically linked to a procreative role. Having children, marriage, starting a family are taken as universal signs of masculinity. However in our study, the role of procreator as a marker of masculinity was not mentioned by the boys. This is due in part to their youth and the fact that they were unmarried. Moreover issues of sexuality were too sensitive to be discussed.

From the boys' perspective, the understanding of feminine vis-à-vis the masculine, usually, if not always, emerges with a negative connotation. For instance, all boys consider girls to have less thinking capacity, and view them as soft, fragile by nature, weak and incapable of venturing out alone. The following quotes expressed by the adolescent boys illustrate these negative aspects: "A girl is weaker"; "girls can be secretaries, sit in a pharmacy, or be teachers"; "girls cannot carry heavy stuff"; "a girl cannot defend herself"; "when one gets tired at work (heavy physically), one wishes one were a girl".

For these boys, masculinity is perceived as the positive opposite of femininity. Among the most frequently cited characteristics attributed to maleness were the "ability to endure physically", followed by "having freedom". When asked their opinion of a popular saying: "this woman is worth 100 men", boys' responses demonstrated an understanding and appreciation of strong women: "she can fill in for the man and spend money on her children"; "someone who works because her father or husband is ill"; and who is independent, self-reliant: "can take care of everything at home"; "she can work in a mixed environment"; "she depends on herself".

Male Privilege and Entitlement

Traditional agricultural communities are often highly patriarchal and families tend to hold strong preferences for sons. A male child is greatly valued and is a symbol of status for the family. Many families in these rural communities indicated a son preference which is reflected in a popular saying: "When they told me it was a boy, my back straightened up and I felt stronger, but when they said it was a girl, the wall supporting me collapsed on my head". Such sayings, which spell out the unwelcome birth of girls, are part of a girl's education and begins to shape her self-image as less valuable in the family. For girls, discrimination becomes an everyday experience reflected in the manner in which the entire spectrum of a girl's needs, from education and health care to the

manner of treatment is demonstrated. In our discussions with parents, some mothers said that if their son were sick, they would be willing to sell their galebias to take him to hospital, while for their daughter, they would simply give them aspirin. The persistence of such discrimination against girls stems from the perceived greater economic, social, and religious utility of sons over daughters.

The following narrations illustrate how boys' entitlements are endorsed: "a boy carries his father's name"; "boys inherit twice as much as girls"; "a boy looks after his father's land when he dies"; "a man prefers a boy"; "one takes boys' opinion not girls".

Being socialized not to express emotions, not to have close relationships with the opposite sex, and to work outside the home at early ages are among the costs of being a man. In traditional conservative communities, adolescent boys' most visible interaction in public with the opposite sex is often through verbal harassment and teasing. In many ways, this practice is closely linked to boys' and men's sense of entitlement to certain masculine privileges over women and girls. It is commonly held that boys and men who initiate harassment towards girls "feel very proud of themselves"; "feel that one is a 'real man'". According to girls, this harassment allows young men to feel that they have gone beyond childhood to adulthood.

Physical and verbal harassment towards girls is a widespread phenomenon in Egypt even in rural conservative communities. It is linked to the exercise of power and is an outward sign of male dominance. It is an important arena where boys and young men can "feel" their masculine entitlement. They are also entitled to having household tasks performed for them. Most boys felt that if girls do not perform their tasks properly or do not listen to their brothers, it is appropriate and right to punish them accordingly. Domestic violence related to women not cooking food properly is linked to men's sense of entitlement to food that is cooked by his wife in the time and manner that he wants.

Boys' Role in Controlling Sister and Family Honor

The notion of family honor and girls' reputation is very much entrenched in these rural communities. As brothers, boys unanimously expressed very strong concerns and worries about their sisters' reputations which is one reason cited for why rural girls usually have very limited physical mobility and social life when reaching puberty. A brother's role as gatekeeper thus is to keep constant surveillance on their sisters. The following narrations illustrate how brothers control their sisters: "We (as brothers) are worried about girls because we fear men's

behavior"; "girls should not go out in order for us (as boys) not to harass them"; "we are afraid she will have relations with men"; "we are afraid she will marry the *Urfi* way"; "girls are not allowed to talk to other men without our permission and the boys share information among themselves about whose sisters are going where". The extent of restrictions and surveillance of their sisters is much higher among uneducated girls as compared to educated girls, who are assumed to be better prepared, and able to handle the world beyond the homes more competently.

For Egyptian youth, falling in love with a girl and winning the girl's heart is also an essential component of a successful masculinity. For uneducated boys, enticing, falling in love and marrying educated girls is perceived as a major challenge and a testament of their manhood. The likelihood of this actually happening seems remote as most marriages are arranged by families, and bride and grooms tend to be paired along socio-economic and class lines.

Between 'ayb and Haram

Perhaps what was most striking about our conversations with boys was the ways in which they spoke about girls' roles and opportunities. According to the majority of boys, there is a clear male-female dichotomy in terms of roles and responsibilities. In their minds, this gendered division of roles and responsibilities justifies the division of public and private spaces, the public space being the domain of males. Further when boys talked about what girls could and could not do, the responses were frequently couched in terms of 'ayb or *Haram*. For example, when boys were asked if they played sports, there was an almost unanimous affirmative response. What about girls, we asked? To that question, we received a very strong chorus of "No, that is 'ayb". What about girls going to school (preparatory) with boys? "No, that is *Haram*". About schooling, boys further added that they cannot sit beside girls in a classroom as it is too "tempting for them" – that too, is "*Haram*". While it is not possible to say how strongly individual boys agree with these rigid notions, they certainly have internalized them to a strong degree which shapes the way in which they articulate their views on girls' rights and roles.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

Our claims are modest. We have attempted to map the meanings of masculinity among adolescent boys in a changing socio-economic context. According to boys, masculinity is strictly defined in relation to gender roles which are linked to social duties and obligations. Even though the results suggest that notions of masculinity are divergent, there are some very basic notions com-

monly held. According to most boys, the essential difference between a boy and a girl is biological and physical, and physical attributes are essential characteristics of masculinity. Another commonly held notion is that boys are courageous and strong, as compared to girls who are viewed as weak, vulnerable, and submissive. Moreover, conduct was considered an essential component of masculinity, which included qualities such as courage, independence, power and control - all of which were considered important markers of conduct. Another prominent characteristic of masculinity according to the boys, particularly vis-à-vis their role as brothers, was related to maintaining girls' reputations.

In rural Egypt, adolescence appears to be a period in which "intensification" of gender roles leads to an exaggerated preference for role segregation. Boys' opinions seem to be deeply entrenched, and very few boys seem to want to challenge normative ideas about gender-segregated roles. Due to their socialization, boys internalize certain notions, which are very hard to give up. Peer pressure, socialization processes and belief systems influence boys' adherence to gender-specific stereotypes. Ideas of the inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes, and of stereotyped roles for men and women limit progress in achieving gender equality.

Increasingly, young men receive contradictory messages about masculine roles and their ability to fulfill them. While boys expect to be future breadwinners, they also recognize the difficulty in achieving that idealized goal. Notions of hegemonic masculinity to which many boys aspire are undercut by their socioeconomic constraints.

Most boys in this study believe that boys should be better educated than girls, yet they also recognize that an educated girl can be an asset to the family. Boys have mixed emotional responses to many of the issues surrounding them and hold conflicting opinions on a number of issues; many boys express concern and empathy for girls, alongside patronizing attitudes. While many boys acknowledge gender inequities in education, mobility, paid work, and other domains of life, they do not express interest in changing these practices.

Globalization is altering the conditions under which young people prepare for adult roles. The fissures and contradictions of social change are particularly acute among adolescent males, who are grappling with received wisdom from elders, personal insecurities of adolescence, and a growing awareness that gender relations are changing around them. Programs that incorporate these insights and enable boys to actively engage in dialogue and debate can serve a useful role for both sexes.

END NOTES

1. 'ayb in Arabic means socially unacceptable.
2. *Haram* in Arabic means religiously incorrect or unacceptable.
3. Upper-Egyptian governorates are the most disadvantaged and poorest region, located in the South of Egypt.
4. The New Visions Program has been developed by CEDPA in recognition of male influence on the enabling environment for the empowerment of girls. Girls have repeatedly told CEDPA that in order for their knowledge and attitudes to result in real behavior change, it is important they have the support of boys and men in their lives.
5. In the course of the ISHRAQ pilot project, the New Visions program was offered to boys and young men

ages 10-20 during a period of 4 months.

6. In the methodology of this study, male participants were selected according to their age (young: 13-15) and (old: 16-19) and education level (between those that have never been to school and those currently at school or finished). Indeed, four different categories of boys and young men were considered; 1) young educated boys, 2) young uneducated boys, 3) old educated young men, and 4) old uneducated young men. The rationale being that educated boys and young men are more likely to have fewer gender stereotypes based on traditional views about issues relevant to girls as opposed to their uneducated counterparts.

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