Informal social networks, civic learning, and young women's political participation in Egypt

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Abstract

When traditional avenues for learning and participation become inaccessible for marginalized people to learn and participate, people tend to develop other unconventional avenues to learn and participate in decisions that affect their lives. This dissertation examines how rural young women in Egypt utilize self-created social networks as unconventional avenues to learn and advance their civic and political participation. It turns the focus of public participation away from classical, formal Tocquevillian understandings to the unconventional avenues of participation that have remained outside of the scope of much research. It uniquely places the question of the pedagogical and political consequences of social capital into an analysis of women's social interactions within social networks. The Study adopts constructivist qualitative approach to penetrate women's realities and capture their unique forms of participation. 49 participants were interviewed through 36 individual in-depth semi-structured interviews and 3 focus group discussions to collect the primary data for this research. The findings reveal that self-created social networks create a space that is not found in other areas of marginalized rural young women's lives; and that create a unique space for these young women to learn and participate in different civic activities in private and public political domains in Egypt in unconventional ways. Finally, this dissertation sets the groundwork for future study to examine political participation beyond the conventional civic and political activities aimed at marginalized groups in developing democracies around the globe. It also provides policy recommendations for education and international development.

Table of Contents

List of Figures vi
List of Tables vii
Abbreviations and Acronyms viii

Chapter One: Introduction 1
Problem Statement 3
Study Purpose 10
Conceptual Framework 11
Research Questions 17
Origin of the Problem 19
Context of the Study 24
Historical Review of Education, Development, and Public Participation in Egypt 28
The Neqdar Nesharek Program 38
Significance of the Study 40
Organization of the study 43

Chapter Two: Literature review 47
Introduction 47
Civic Engagement and Social Capital 48
Limits of Participation in Civil Society 60
Informal Learning and Civic Knowledge 71
Informal Participation in the Middle East 84
Gaps in literature and further research 94
Summary 97

Chapter Three: Methodology and methods 99
Introduction 99
Study design and methodological consideration 100
Selecting research sites 104
Sampling and recruitment of participants 106
Research methods 114
Data Collection 120
Data Analysis 123
Validity 128
Summary 130

Chapter Four: Paradoxical discourses 132
Constraining discourses 135
Encouraging discourses 159
Summary 167

Chapter Five: Avenues of learning 168
Individually constructed women's groups 170
Avenues of learning 174
Learning from action 190

Life skills, civic skills, and recognition 197
Summary 207

Chapter Six: Women's "invisible" civic and political participation 209
Women's civic and political participation 211
Women's strategies 230
Women's agency 235
Summary 241

Chapter Seven: Conclusion 243
Paradoxical discourses 247
Avenues of learning: pedagogical pathways to civic engagement 248
Women's "invisible" civic engagement 251
Women's practices and mainstream views of civic engagement in Egypt 252
Summary of key findings 257
Implications 267
Future directions for research 272
Contribution of the study 275

References 277

List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Relation between Social Capital, Civic Learning and Civic Engagement (p. 14)

Figure 5.1: Group Intersection and Overlap (pg. 187)

Figure 5.2: Women's learning in group and in civic action (pg. 196)

Figure 7.1: Difference between Women's Informal Learning and Traditional Schooling (p. 249)

List of Tables

Table 3.1. Participant demographic information and distribution (pg. 112)

Abbreviations and Acronyms

CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
EFA	Education for All
ICCS	International Civic and Citizenship Education Study
IEA	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NCW	National Council for Women
SES	Socioeconomic Status
SYPE	Survey of Young People in Egypt
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development Theory

Chapter One: Introduction

Why do young women in rural Egypt, who are generally not engaged in public life, tend to participate more in civic and political activities in their society when they affiliate with social networks? Competing explanations have attempted to understand this phenomenon. On the one hand, scholars in the development field argue that such social networks, especially those provided through development programs, provide unmet civic learning that formal education is unable to provide to marginalized, young women (Brady, 2005). On the other, scholars from political science, political psychology, and political sociology draw on social interdependence theories to study how interactions within these social networks—by social networks I refer to women's self-created face-to-face groups where they meet and interact in regular basis—facilitate cooperative learning by providing the knowledge and skills required for civic and political participation (Paxton, 2002). However, the focus of these studies, e.g. (Baron, 2005; Moghadam, 2003; Sinclair, 2012), is mainly on the voting behavior, turnout for public elections and participation in political events and less on the participation in everyday, public life. While the acquisition of civic knowledge may take place in different settings, educationalists in comparative civic education and citizenship teaching and learning provide plausible arguments that learning from experience and sharing knowledge within informal social networks is a form of lifelong learning (Schugurensky & Myers, 2003). However, when the focus on this type of research is limited further, to a consideration of the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), it tends to focus on questions of the extent to which ordinary social networks (e.g. family, neighborhood groups, sport clubs),

as opposed to schools, operate as political socialization agents for boys and girls (Haha, 2010). Furthermore, despite the importance of research on civic education, much of it, such as the *IEA Civic Education Study* of 28 countries, uses the same set of indicators to assess the relationships between social networks and civic participation without regard to important distinctions such as the different types of governing systems e.g. democratic vs. authoritarian countries, metropolitan and rural communities, or male or female young people (Richardson, 2003). In this regard, it is important to understand the context where young women exist so as to understand what civic engagement and civic life mean to a young woman in a rural community located in contemporary Egypt.

As is the case in most Muslim and Arab authoritarian and patriarchal societies in the Middle East, young women in rural Egypt have far fewer freedoms especially those related to restrictions on mobility than boys (El Saadawi, 2007). Generally, certain freedoms are in short supply for most Egyptians as I elaborate more in the coming sections (Albrecht, 2013). This context is complicated by the role that marriage plays as one of the most important social events in the lives of young people, especially young women. For young women in Egypt, marriage is a coming-of-age marker in which they are recognized as adults and gain some opportunities to participate in public life with less family supervision and restriction (Ramadan, 2012). Limited access to safe public space for women in Egypt especially young women in rural areas that is appropriate to participate in their public life is another reason of social restrictions especially for young women (Brady, 2005).

Research into why women's participation remains low tends to use indicators such as voter turnout and participation in formal civil society which were developed by Tocqueville (1838) and may neglect the importance of understanding the acts of young women's everyday lives as a form of informal civic participation. This study examined what role informal civic learning within informal social networks plays in the development of civic participation in everyday lives of young women in rural Egypt. The overarching research question that guided this study was: how do young women understand their participation in informal, social networks in developing and advancing their civic and political participation in rural Egypt? The data, in the data chapters 4, 5, and 6, shows that young women utilize social networks as avenues of civic learning to advance their civic involvement in their societies.

In this introductory chapter, I identify: the origins of the research problem, the context of this study, and an overview of the conceptual framework I used to guide this inquiry. Finally, it outlines the significance of this study.

Problem Statement

Scholarship in political science and other disciplines tends to apply socioeconomic status (SES)—education, income, and class—as an explanatory model of behavior to predict and understand public participation. SES is used to explain women's civic engagement in Egypt. Many studies, including those by Miibrath and Goel (1977) provide empirical evidence on the relationship between class and participation. Other studies, including Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) have concluded that education, as a component of SES, is indeed one of the best indicators of public participation. In addition, Downs (1957) argues there is cost of participation that entails the time and

effort required by an individual to learn about politics in order to make an informed decision. In this vein, Brady, Verba and Schlozman (1995) argue educated individuals are more likely to possess the intellectual, cognitive, knowledge and skills required to navigate the complexity of the political process. Their study concludes the higher the education level, the lower the participation cost that supports the higher level of participation. While Brady, Verba, and Schlozman's explanatory SES model may help assess people's participation in conventional activities (i.e. voting), it fails to capture other forms of public participation such as involvement in community work and everyday life of local society and widely neglects less-advantaged groups who fall outside of the selected variables used to determine participation. This study, therefore, troubled the notion of SES as indicative of civic engagement of rural young women. The findings of this study show how less-advantaged young women with low socioeconomic status are involved in different civic activities in private and public political domains in Egypt; and how this involvement is yet beyond the capture of research that applies SES as determinant of political participation.

In authoritarian contexts such as Egypt, as I discuss later in the study context, schooling may not play the same role as it does in most democratic societies (Baraka, 2008; Finkel, 2002). The value and weight given to education in authoritarian contexts is downgraded by authoritarian regimes, where "investments in human capital are influenced in important ways by the type of regime in power" (Baum & Lake, 2003, p. 336). One example is the focus of most authoritative regimes is on the access and enrolment rather than quality and attainment (Sieverding, 2012). In contrast, other

scholars recount on the important role of education in other authoritarian contexts in the region where school may provide a space for participation for some women (Adely, 2004). Nevertheless, the popularity of using SES and traditional schooling as major underpinning determinants of public participation contributes to the paucity of scholarship on other, less formal types of education and may not provide evidence of role that informal learning has in promoting public participation. Informal learning is defined by Livingstone (1999) as "any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions" (p. 51). Equally, non-formal education (organized, curriculum-based, educational workshops and trainings usually provided by civil society that take place outside the formal school system [Marsick & Watkins, 2001]) may face the same critiques in authoritarian contexts, where civil society is co-opted by authoritarian regimes (Albrecht, 2013). This is one challenge of applying the SES model.

Another challenge to understanding this topic is the lack of research and diverse methodological stances capable of examining women's civic participation in rural Egypt. The limited research available focuses heavily on measuring women's participation in state-organized civic activities (e.g. voting, affiliation with political institutions) and formal organizations while failing to consider the role that everyday, lived experiences plays in their societies. According to Abu-Lughod (2010), research in the field of women's participation has mostly focused on whether there is a deficit of democracy in the macro-context of the Arab region with little attention given to questions of local communities and how young women practice citizenship. Additionally, despite the

emergence of recent literature on the organizational and civic capacity of groups, the focus of much research on the phenomenon of public participation in political socialization and political psychology is rooted in the study of the behavior of discrete individuals. Such research tradition tends to cut individuals off from their social context where their engagement and behavior can better be understood as a part of their networks of social interaction (Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998).

The recent nationwide Survey of Young People in Egypt (SYPE[1]) used quantitative approaches and SES determinants to examine the civic engagement of 15,000 young people. Relaying on SES determinants, SYPE examined individuals in isolation from the social fabric that connects them to their world. SYPE reported that, in general, civic participation is low among Egyptians, with only 3.6% of the entire population reporting that they ever volunteered. Young women ages 15 to 25 in rural Egypt, in particular, are underrepresented in civic activities. Furthermore, SYPE concluded that there is a substantial gender gap in participation of rural women with only 1.5% of young women participating, as opposed to 13.1% of young men. In assessing the level of civic engagement, SYPE measures the extent to which young people in Egypt (both female and male) are active in trying to bring about change in their country more broadly in the following activities: voting, participation in political events, reading about

[1] SYPE is the first of its kind national survey that was conducted in Egypt between 2009 – 2014 and covers five major areas, including education and civic engagement. With the purpose of updating the state of knowledge on youth in Egypt, SYPE was carried out by the Population Council, the Center for the Study of Youth and Political Conflict of the University of Tennessee, and the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics in Egypt with funding support from the USAID, SIDA, UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women and others (Population Council, 2015).

politics, affiliation with civil society, volunteering in civil and political institutions, and internet and media use.

However, this study argued that low engagement of young women in rural areas in Egypt, as reported by SYPE, aligns with two epistemological challenges to the study of public participation: the focus on SES and its quantitative methodological stances. Furthermore, applying western concepts to assess local participation by these kinds of survey may result in a fact that the outcome of such surveys may go awry. Such concepts (e.g., participation in political events, affiliation or volunteering with civil society) assume that a particular mode of engagement makes sense or resonates irrespective of context where mistakenly assuming that volunteering is universally indicative of civic engagement. While using these indicatives may be useful in other contexts, it may not be viable in an authoritarian and highly surveilled space. Such "globalized localism" as argued by de Sousa Santos (2006) contributes to a fact that "local conditions are disintegrated, oppressed, excluded, de-structured, and, eventually, restructured as subordinate inclusion." (p. 397). The reliance of SYPE on SES and using volunteerism as a universal marker of civic engagement is in a sense projecting what counts as "civic" in one setting and assuming it has universal coherence and apply it to assess civic engagement of young women in rural Egypt. This study, therefore, troubled SYPE and SES to challenge the quantitative methodological approach usually used to examine civic engagement of rural women in Egypt.

Another challenge is related to the unsatisfactory public education. While women's participation in formal education may not be the most salient factor in informing their civic engagement (El Baradei, 2010; Ginsburg & Megahed, 2008; Sobhy,

2012), informal learning and non-formal education have long been promoted as a supplement to formal education in development policies by international organizations (McGinn, 2013). Over the last two decades, marginalized women in rural Egypt, who are less educated and poor, have been the targets of educational and political development programs (Salem, Ibrahim, & Brady, 2003). In addition, the underrepresentation of young women in research in the comparative international education field encourages a more sophisticated examination of the relationship between economic, political, and social forces and gender (Arnove, Torres, & Franz, 2012; McGinn, 1996; McGinn, & Epstein, 2000). Development organizations promote development and education policies as a vehicle to increase the public participation of less-advantaged women in developing countries, frequently working under the assumption that their programs develop the social networks that will play a pedagogical role, as a form of informal learning (Arnove, 1980; McGinn, 2013; Welch, 2001).

Salem, Ibrahim & Brady (2003) argue that in rural Egypt, "penetrating even the most isolated locales, community development activities today represent a notable space for civic participation" (p. 174) and represent an emerging agent of political socialization—political socialization is when individuals develop their political knowledge and values through interactions with parents, teachers, friends, club members, sports-team, and media (Haha, 2010). In addition, scholars argue that the conversations and discussions that take place in social networks and are a byproduct of women's informal gatherings in rural Egypt have a pedagogical role (Salem, Ibrahim, & Brady, 2003; Sallam, 2015b; Ramadan, Abdel-Tawab, Elsayed, & Roushdy, 2014). Social

networks may offer less-advantaged young women the possibility of knowledge sharing and a space that fosters civic engagement (Cochran, 2012).

This study considered and drew on informal social networks that were formed as a byproduct of *Neqdar Nesharek* program, a development project and entrepreneurship-training program[2] in rural Egypt. In addition to its intended goal of equipping women with entrepreneurial skills, this example of non-formal education produces opportunities for gatherings that may, unintentionally, create space for informal conversations that, in turn, promote other forms of civic learning. As Marsick and Watkins (2001) and Mundel and Schugurensky (2008) argue, these incidental conversations and social interactions between women may provide a vehicle for socialization and learning about civic knowledge such as community resources and public news.

While development programs have succeeded in penetrating isolated, rural communities, thereby providing unconventional avenues (i.e. social networks) for civic participation and political socialization, several questions remained unanswered. This study addressed those unanswered questions including those related to the nature and extent to which informal learning within the informal social networks advances the civic participation of young women in rural Egypt. The study also examined whether women maintain and develop new networks upon the phase-out of development projects. More importantly, the study examined how young women appropriate these informal social

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[2] *Neqdar Nesharek* (which means "We Can Participate" in Arabic) is a four-year entrepreneurship training program developed by the Population Council that targeted marginalized young women in rural Egypt with limited educational opportunities to provide a safe space where they can meet and find the support they need to seek employment. Detailed description is follow later in this chapter.

networks as unconventional avenues that capable of advancing their public involvement in an authoritarian and patriarchal context in rural Egypt.

Study Purpose

While the discussion of the context, later in this chapter, provides an understanding of how and why existing hegemonic approaches to political participation do not account for how young women engage in public life in Egypt, this study aimed to advance an understanding of how less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt conceptualize their experience of informal social networks in the development of their civic engagement. The study attempted to generate a deeper understanding of the nature of the pedagogical role played by informal social networks in fostering civic knowledge and skills. It is also considered how this civic learning within informal social networks, particularly those individually constructed by women, play in advancing the civic engagement of less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt.

The study was guided by two major assumptions. The first assumption was that social interactions within women's self-created social networks generate social capital, which in turn facilitates the transformation of civic knowledge and information into use for participation in women's communities that also facilitates recognition of young women by their families and society (Coleman, 1988). The second assumption is that informal social networks are self-created by women as a byproduct of development programs. These informal social networks create a unique space that is not found in other areas of less-advantaged, rural young women's lives (Brady, 2005). These assumptions are important to understand that these non-familial networks of women would not come into being under everyday conditions in rural settings in Egypt. Finally, the study also

aimed to advance an understanding of informal civic learning through social networks as it relates to women's civic engagement in rural Egypt. The following conceptual framework shows how this study is grounded in and guided by relevant theories.

Conceptual Framework

As discussed earlier in the problem statement, research traditionally examines involvement in public affairs through a socioeconomic approach that is framed through the lens of the SES of a discrete individual as predictor of engagement. Rather than cutting the individual out of their social fabric, this study considered the relationship between discrete individuals and their social interactions. From this perspective, it was possible to see how women weave together their learning and engagement. By troubling the notion of SES and the epistemological stance of SYPE, this analytical framework incorporates social interaction, social capital, and social networks together to conceptualize women's civic engagement in rural Egypt. While most of the political participation studies adopt SES to predict people involvement and since most social capital definitions are taken from an understanding of SES, this study offered different way to assess public participation of less-advantaged young women. The study also highlighted the way less-advantaged women with low SES benefit from and generate social capital through their everyday interactions within their self-created networks. This dissertation grounded in situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and it examined the potential for the development of civic participation of young women in rural Egypt through civic learning in social networks.

In a move away from conventional notions of learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced situated learning theory, a concept informed by cognitive and socio-cultural constructivist perspectives. Situated learning theory provides one model for understanding how the relationship between social interaction and civic engagement may be affected by personal and contextual factors. Building on the work of Dewey (1938), Lewin (1947), Vygotsky (1978) and others, situated learning theory suggests that knowledge is contextually situated, with learner considered as a cognitive apprentice in everyday lives within a social network. Lave and Wenger coined this phenomenon as "community of practice" (p. 55) or "lived-in world" (p. 121).

Lewin (1947) places learning into a larger social context based on interactions between learners and their environment, e.g. network. This perspective matches Lave and Wenger's concept of authentic learning. Learners engage in activities that are situated in their own culture within which they negotiate meaning and construct understanding of their social circumstances. In this regard, learning is seen as mutual transformation of existing knowledge; where through mutual transformation, social circumstances influence the construction of knowledge in different ways. Stories, conversation, reflection, and collaboration are among key components of situated learning. Lave and Wenger emphasize the importance of "story" and "conversation" to learning, pointing out that stories play a major role in informal learning where "learning is supported by conversations and stories about problematic and especially difficult cases" (p. 108). For a learner, the purpose is not to learn *from* talk; rather, it is to learn *to* talk. Spontaneous

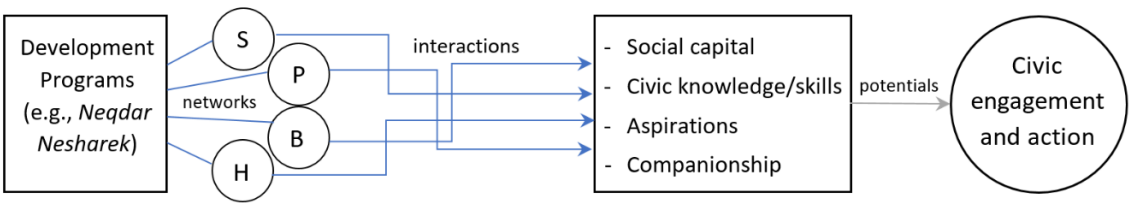
conversation on civic and public affairs topics represents a symbolic activity that has the potential to shape civic activity and help young women imagine future engagement.

The strength of the situated learning theory lies in its explanation of the process of learning in trajectories of participation as a part of human experience. The other significant aspect of situated learning is an understanding of how context, the social world, provides a space where young women are both members of a community and also agents for activity. Situated learning theory provides a framework for exploring the influence that informal learning, civic knowledge, and context have on the relationship between social networks and civic action. Proponents of this school of thought argue the situated nature of knowing, knowledge, is redefined as a social construction through conversation and negotiation by learners (Applebee, 1993). Applebee relates learners' conversations to social actions and asserts that "to converse is to take social action" (p. 8). Similar to Lewin (1947) and Bandura (2001), Applebee emphasizes the bidirectional relationship between learners and their environment as a way to learn through conversation and observation that "enables people to acquire large, integrated patterns of behavior without having to form them gradually by tedious trial and error" (p. 12).

Because every theory of education requires a theory of society that describes how social processes shape education (Scribner & Cole, 1973), my conceptual framework utilized the concept of social capital by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1993) to: a) understand the process of human capital creation within social structures that permits access to civic knowledge and facilitates civic learning (Coleman, 1988), b) address the effect of civic knowledge and learning in facilitating civic engagement and

using Putnam's (1993) language “social structures of cooperation lead people to become engaged and participate” (p. 89), and c) to draw on its role to permit access to resources by nurturing agency of young people to acquire relevant resources (Bourdieu, 1986).

Figure 1.1 – Relation Between Social Capital, Civic Learning and Civic Engagement



The diagram in Figure 1.1 depicts the proposed relation of social capital, as a means and end rooted in social interactions and networks, with learning and civic engagement. Social networks, as one of biproducts of development programs, foster social interactions and discussions about civic issues. During these social interactions, young women learn civic skills and develop aspirations; social capital giving them access to human capital (knowledge and skills) that others may offer in these interactions. This human capital in terms gives them other cultural capital (e.g., status with their parents, husbands or mothers-in-law) that facilitate their civic engagement and involvement in civic action.

To conceptualize these interrelated relations, I first distinguish between social interactions, social networks, and social capital. This can be understood through the hypothetical example of a group of faculties working together in the same university; they interact as they meet in corridors, as they grab their lunch at the university cafeteria, in the parking lot when they are leaving and in many other incidents. This type of social

interactions, however, is not the one I mean where social capital is rooted. If a group of these faculties decided to meet and chat during their daily lunch time, they turn these interactions into systematic and recurrent interactions. The systematic and recurrent discussions take a form of social structure; for the purposes of this study, these recurrent discussant partners compose an individual's social network. Members of this faculties network benefit from the multidisciplinary knowledge exists in the group; and this is what constitutes social capital. Social capital, according to Coleman (1988) is a "byproduct" of social interaction that exists in social relations (p. S118). If a discussion on a public concern (e.g. environment) took place within the network of this faculties example and increased members' understanding about this topic, it means they are engaged in public concern. If some of these faculties decided to integrate the issue of environment to their course syllabi or even to engage students to think about solution for an environmental risk, this means that the knowledge they gained from their network led them to act to mitigate this environmental risk. This example, though not directly relevant to young women, shows the relation between social capital, civic learning, and civic engagement. It also shows the difference between social interactions, social networks, and social capital as interrelated terms, but they are not used interchangeably. (Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998).

This dissertation uniquely placed the question of the pedagogical and political consequences of social capital into an analysis of women's social interactions within social networks. Despite the epistemological and conceptual differences between this study and Coleman and Putnam's functionalist conceptualization of social capital, I drew

on their epistemological framework to address the analytical utility of social capital for civic engagement in three crucial areas of interest: informal civic learning, political attitudes, and aspiration.

In this study, in contrast to Putnam and Coleman, Bourdieu's (1986) conception of social capital was useful in understanding the kind of social capital that less-advantaged rural young women value and need, rather than the kind of social capital they do or do not gain from schooling. Also, the conceptualization of social capital posited by Coleman (1988) informed my framework; though Coleman studied Catholic schools in the American context, this framework was useful for understanding the importance of social networks in connecting less-advantaged young women to various resources, including knowledge and information. Coleman's articulation of social capital as a byproduct available to members within a social gathering illustrates its relevance to a consideration of the role of informal learning within informal social gatherings and young women's civic engagement in rural Egypt. Putnam's (1993) idea that trust among members of social networks helps create reciprocity and civic associations was also relevant. Reciprocity as Putnam argues, increases cooperation, civic activity, and the collective good of members in a network. By extending Coleman and Putnam's frameworks to an examination of the social capital and informal civic learning of young women in social networks in rural Egypt, this study considered the role played by social networks in generating social capital, and how it facilitates civic learning through shared knowledge and experiences. In addition, applying Coleman's concept of social capital helped to understand the norms and obligations of women in relation to their participation

in public life. Grounding social capital in situated learning theory, therefore, offered a more nuanced framework for understanding how women's interactions facilitated the generation of social capital, civic learning, and civic participation.

In sum, social capital was a central thesis of my work because it illustrated a process of informal civic learning where women, regardless of their SES, taught and learned from each other through their everyday social interactions within a social network. I show in the findings how this learning, as a situated and continual process stimulated women to: 1) action; 2) experience created through action; 3) reflection on experience; and 4) adaptation to their world.

Research Questions

Despite the educational and political development efforts in the Arab region, research in the field of women's participation has focused on whether there is a deficit of democracy and little attention has been given to local communities and how less-advantaged, rural young women, practice civic and political participation. There is a need to understand the acts of women's everyday lives as a form of participation and resistance. In addition to the question I posed at the outset of this dissertation, "why do young women in rural Egypt, who are generally not engaged in public life, tend to participate more in civic activities in their society when they affiliate with a social network?", this dissertation addressed other interrelated questions. The introductory two chapters of this dissertation highlighted unanswered questions and gaps in literature on this topic. Informal casual social groups and personal networks, as Yom (2005) argues, are "the richest source of civic vitality in the Arab world [and are] more communally

oriented than other CSOs" (pp. 18-19). Furthermore, how less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt appropriate these unconventional avenues to advance their participation in everyday lives is examined through this study. In addition, in this study, I asked how young women develop and use their social capital as a means and end generated within social networks in relation to their civic engagement?

Another question is how does a program like *Neqdar Nesharek* aimed at empowering women through entrepreneurial education shape the ways in which young women in Fayoum governorate come to think about their political potential and what is potentially political in the larger sociopolitical context of Upper Egypt? While this study did not examine the effects of the program per se, it focused on understanding how these programs fostered informal networks that in turns help women think about and engage in political issues. Finally, this dissertation addressed these questions to explore this phenomenon through an overarching question "how do young women understand their participation in informal, social networks in developing and advancing their civic and political participation in rural Egypt?" and through the following four research questions:

1. How do young women in Fayoum understand the social and political issues that impact their lives and identities within their communities?
2. How young women understand their experiences of their self-created women groups in relation to their civic learning?
3. How are these young women drawing upon and applying what they learned in these informal groups?

4. How do the experiences of these women then compare with mainstream accounts of civic participation in Egypt?

The following section provides background of the contextual and historical information on the magnitude of these problems.

Origin of the Problem

In Egypt today, 62% of the population is below the age 29, and almost 42% of young people are between the age of 15 and 25, divided equally between female and male (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). Furthermore, according to the most recent longitudinal survey, which I problematize by the findings of this study, the civic engagement of young women in both political life and civic life in Egypt is low (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). Young women ages 15 to 25 in rural Egypt are underrepresented in civic activities where there is a substantial gender gap in participation, where only 1.5% of young women participate, as opposed to 13.1% of young men (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). SYPE assessed the level of civic engagement by measuring the extent to which young people in Egypt (both female and male) are active in trying to bring about change in their local communities and the country more broadly in activities include voting, participation in political events, volunteerism, and internet and media use.

Researchers have also concluded that more women than men are being excluded from education, employment, and participation in public life in Egypt (Assaad, & Barsoum, 2007). While enrolment in primary school is nearly universal where 95% of young people aged 13-18 in 2014 had attended school, many young people do not complete mandatory basic education and 18.4% of women are illiterate opposed to 7.4%

of men (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). Further, exclusion of young women, from education, public life, and work, is higher in rural areas compared to their counterparts in metropolitan areas (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). According to the women surveyed in SYPE, their exclusion constitutes an alienation that affects several aspects of their life trajectories including their careers and public roles (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). Some scholars assert that this exclusion represents unequal citizenship for women and a wasted opportunity for the society (Assaad, & Krafft, 2013, 2015; LaGraffe, 2012; Momani, 2015; Sayre, 2016).

Scholars have provided plausible explanations of the factors that lead to this underrepresentation of young women in rural Egypt, including the high dropout rate of schooling of women in rural Egypt, and the poor quality of education, in general and particularly in rural communities, as a means for acquiring knowledge essential for civic engagement (El Baradei, 2010). This argument aligns with the recent results of SYPE where 50% of youth who attained five years of school at a national level cannot read and write (51.5% female and 45.1% male) and 40% cannot do basic math 38.4% among female and 31% male (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). Furthermore, El Baradei (2015) argues that the unsatisfactory public education in general, and especially civic education, is another reason. The dissatisfaction per se is due to several factors, including the weak role of the overburdened public education sector in preparing students, especially female students, to engage in their society where ineffective instructional methods and other dimensions of school quality may be favorable to boys not the same for girls (Ginsburg & Megahed, 2008).

Other explanations highlight the limited time allocated to civic education as a subject that has been downgraded to secondary importance compared to other subjects such as science and math, and the diminishing quality of civic education where schools focus only on teaching about democracy but not practicing democracy in the classroom (Ersado & Gignoux, 2014; Kandil, 2011). In addition, while the enrollment rate of female students in Egypt has increased since the Education for All (EFA) agreement, the most vulnerable women—those who are poor with low socioeconomic status and live in rural areas—are still uneducated and do not complete their primary education (El Baradei, 2010; Ersado & Gignoux, 2014; Sobhy, 2012). Girls' marriage at an early age is another reason for school dropout as it eliminates the chances of education (Sallam, 2015a). SYPE concludes that 52.1% of early marriage is among women in rural Egypt who marry by age 18; three years lower than the average rate for women with no education nationwide (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015).

Ultimately, and similar to other contexts, the repressive sociopolitical context where schools exist, as in Egypt and most of the Middle East, shapes the outcomes of schooling. Schools mostly mirror the limitations and achievements of the community. Furthermore, the broken link between education outcomes and economic prospects undermines the importance of schooling, especially for young women. With the adoption of economic liberalization policies in Egypt in the 1970s and the end of the welfare state, as I discuss later in this chapter, the unemployment rate is increasing, because the government is no longer committed and able to hire all graduates (Assaad & Krafft, 2013, 2015). Further, unemployment in Egypt is gendered, with the percentage of unemployed

male youth lower than females, especially among less-advantaged young women who have less access to economic opportunities (Sieverding, 2012). In Egypt, as most Arab countries, youth are ambivalent about education because of the perception of a lack of opportunities that education presents (Assaad & Krafft, 2015; Sieverding, 2012). In this regard, Shirazi (2015) notes the pervasive role of *wasta* (the Arabic word for nepotism) in accessing economic opportunities in Arab countries, as opposed to educational merits and qualifications, where "good *wasta* can facilitate one's academic, profession, personal, and even legal matters" (emphasis in the original, p. 101).

In its 2015 report, the National Council for Women (NCW) offers additional explanations for the underrepresentation of young women in Egypt, especially less-advantaged young women in rural communities. For example, most less-advantaged women in rural Egypt do not have national identification cards as it entails financial cost to obtain an identification card, which is a requirement for all official participation in public life (e.g. voting; National Council for Women, 2015). The report also highlights the difficulty of women's access to the information and knowledge required to participate. These challenges have increased the suffering of young women in rural Egypt and contributed to their limited representation, but they have also sparked the attention of researchers and international organizations with the aim of reducing the inequality against young women in rural areas.

Enhancing women's status, particularly eliminating gender disparities in education, employment, and civic engagement, has been prioritized by governments of developing countries and international development policies over the last two decades.

Women's participation has also become a critical issue in the field of comparative international education, especially after two goals of (EFA) that align with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2 and 3 ("Achieve Universal Primary Education" and "Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women" respectively), and adopted by 189 countries and several international development organizations (United Nations, 2015a). Among other outcomes, the adoption of the MDGs focused attention on the problem of underrepresentation of young women in public life. While several countries have made good progress in most of the eight MDGs, Egypt is lagging behind the agreed targets. Despite goal 3.3, for instance, which said 'proportion of seats held by women in national parliament', the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament in 2013 had decreased by about 50% compared to 1990; in 2015, women in Egypt held only 2% of the total seats (UN Women, 2015). Women's underrepresentation in general, and in civic activities in particular, stimulated the need for development policies to adopt unconventional development approaches to developing countries like Egypt in order to level women's participation.

Women's underrepresentation and comparative studies

In addition, the underrepresentation of young women has encouraged a more sophisticated examination of education within the comparative international education field, in relationship to economic, political, and social forces (Arnove, Torres, & Franz, 2012; McGinn, 1996; McGinn, & Epstein, 2000). In the Presidential Address of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), McGinn (1996) asserted the need for a different focus for comparative education, aimed at elaborating the education

and democratic behavior of local communities where differences are honored rather than ignored. McGinn (1996) argues that politicizing the societies in which we live and learn is the best way to increase democratic participation: “research on education and democratization clearly demonstrates that democratic engagement in adult life is the result of having participated as a youth” (p. 356). By democratization, McGinn (1996) refers to freedom of “participation of all people in framing and making decisions that affect them” (p. 356).

In Egypt, as most of the Middle East, with exception of Israel, research in civic education, especially on informal socialization agents other than school (e.g. family, social networks, media) is comparatively less than other regions. There is limited research on women’s representation in the few comparative studies in the region. Most of the available research on civic education and political socialization is in Israel (Pinson, 2007). Haha (2010) notes the same in Africa where most of civic education effort is taking place in South Africa. One of the reasons of this limitation in the Middle East according to (Ibrahim, 2013) is the narrow room for democracy and free speech given by authoritarian regimes. Ibrahim noted that when culture of democracy and freedom is existed, all natural agents of socialization function well and provide the enabling environment for creativity and innovation especially for education.

Context of the Study

The education and civic engagement of Egyptians in general and of young women in rural Egypt in particular must be understood within the context of the country’s history. Like most countries in the Middle East, Egypt is an established authoritarian state

(Albrecht, 2013; Brownlee, 2007). The constitution of 1923 recognized the political rights of Egyptians and articulated the right to vote in general elections for male adults only. It was not until 1956 that a new constitution granted women the right to vote (Hatem, 2000). Since the military coup in 1952 and the shift from monarchy to republic, the political structure in Egypt has changed considerably, as Egypt adopted a single-party system until 1970 when former President Sadat dissolved the Arab Socialist Union and a multi-party system emerged (Kassem, 2004). However, the multi-party system ended for all practical purposes in 1978 with the establishment of the National Democratic Party, the government party that became the solo player in the political scene until the Arab Uprisings[3] in Egypt in 2011 (Albrecht, 2013; Brownlee, 2007).

Albrecht (2005) argues that civil society in Egypt is co-opted by the authoritarian regime—by co-opted, Albrecht means that the most of civil society, which I define later, is controlled by the authoritarian regime to limit and control formal civic activities (e.g. involvement in politics, voting). Albrecht also argues that the consecutive regimes in Egypt since 1952 have deliberately co-opted civil society in order for it to "serve as an instrument to control society and moderate societal dissent" (p. 379). In this context, scholars have provided a plausible argument that the civil society in Egypt entails institutions that are merely imitative of democracy, discretely embedded as "window dressing" (Albrecht, 2013, p. 69) to stabilize the authoritarian state. Albrecht (2013)

[3] The Arab Uprisings refers to a series of protests and anti-government revolutionary waves of demonstrations in the Arab world that began in Tunisia on December 18, 2010 and spread throughout other countries of North Africa and the Middle East (LaGraffe, 2012).

provided two explanations to support this argument. The emergence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the multi-party system in the 1990s did not promote pluralism, democratization, and demand-making policies; rather they were utilized by the repressive state as instruments for societal control. Second, the toleration and co-opting of civil society, including opposition political parties, reduced the pressure on the regime by international organizations and Western governments for pluralism, while also repressing societal dissent by those who were calling for freedom and democratization (Albrecht, 2013; Brownlee, 2007; Kassem, 2004).

In this section, I utilize three concepts by Albrecht (2013)—dissent, opposition, and resistance—to first characterize the relationship between the repressive state and the tolerated and coopted opposition including civil society, and second to address strategies used by the regime in order to understand how the regime suppresses different types of opposition. These three concepts help to clarify how the authoritarian regime in Egypt limits citizens' participation to formal channels of public life. According to Albrecht (2013), *dissent* is an overarching category of opposition practiced not only in politics but also in other types of human relations. It is also not limited to opposition of political institutions but includes mass-mobilized social unrest by the ordinary public, such as the recent Arab Uprisings. The second concept by Albrecht (2013) is *opposition*, which refers specifically to organized opposition that is usually formed by elites and political institutions (e.g. political parties, labor unions, non-governmental organizations). *Resistance* is the last type of opposition, and is mainly used by radicals and Islamists

against the political regime. Although it is similar to dissent, resistance is often practiced through violent means and mainly in political actions.

The repressive regime in Egypt applies three different strategies in dealing with these three types of opposition. A mix of co-optation, legal restriction, and repression is used by the regime to control the opposition of political parties and NGOs. While the regime succeeded in repressing the resistance of radicals and Islamist by banning and prohibiting all their activities, societal dissent remains a challenge for the authoritarian regime. Controlling societal dissent, especially among young people, is a dynamic process. Albrecht (2013) notes a framework of formal and informal control mechanisms developed by the regime to limit, constrict, suppress, and control public engagement in political and civic activities in Egypt. Examples of these are the enforcement of the State of Emergency Law, the exercise of control over the judiciary by inventing a parallel judiciary system (i.e. State Security Court and Military Court), and the utilization of thugs and lack of concern for increasing street sexual harassment. The latter might disproportionately affect women especially where regime strategically allow sexual harassment to intimidate women and limit their participation (Blaydes & Tarouty, 2009)

Despite these restrictions, discourses of economic and political reform, human rights, and democratization appeal to activists and young people, who reach out to the public through social media, informal personal relations, and informal social networks (Kassem, 2013). Social media and informal social networks are one form of civic engagement and have potentials to encourage young people's political participation, which could induce systematic change in Egypt. Social media, however, may not be an

option for less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt as it is for their counterparts in metropolitan areas. Therefore, young women in rural Egypt are left with only informal face-to-face social networks as avenues for civic engagement in public life as such.

Historical Review of Education, Development, and Public Participation in Egypt

This section provides a historical overview of education, development, and public participation in Egypt. The aim of this section is to introduce the major social and cultural parameters of the study in order to understand what it means to be a Muslim young woman in a rural community of the contemporary Egypt.

The changing conditions of women's education in Egypt

Public education in Egypt can be characterized historically in relation to two major political systems that have structured Egyptian society since 1805. The first is the monarchy, which ruled Egypt from 1805 until the military coup in 1952. Since 1952 when the military coup dissolved the monarchy and shift to a republic, Egypt has been structured by a presidential system. In addition, during the monarchy era, Egypt was a British colony for 40 years (1882 to 1922; Vatikiotis, 1991). The Egyptian education system has changed over the course of these two eras in terms of quality and accessibility. During the monarchy era, education was developed with the value of quality over accessibility, and access to education was restricted to specific groups, elites, and foreigners (El Nashar, 2012; Kandil, 2011).

After the military succeeded in overturning the monarchy, during the republic era public education in Egypt shifted to reflect the value of accessibility over quality, and free education for all was considered a right was one principle of the declared ideology of

the 1952 revolution. By the time the military took over the power and dissolved the monarchy, 75% of Egyptians over the age of ten was illiterate, about 90% of whom were poor females (El Nashar, 2012; Kandil, 2011). The new government prioritized free access to education for all classes, both to realize its declared Nasserist pan-Arab ideology, and to attempt to shift from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. The government's policy of free education for both men and women included primary, secondary, and tertiary education (Faksh, 1976; Helal, 2005; Kandil, 2011; Vatikiotis, 1991). Scholars attribute most of today's problems in the Egyptian public education system to this policy that was enforced by the government beginning in 1952 (El Baradei, 2015; Faksh, 1976; Megahed & Lack, 2011; Sobhy, 2012; Zaalouk, 2004).

The education system in Egypt during the 1950s and 1960s is best characterized as state-centered, as president Gamal Abdel Nasser, who came to power in 1952, situated education as a central component of his development strategy to build a modern Egypt through a combination of economic and social policies to achieve the shift toward industrialization (Sieverding, 2012). Although the expansion of (EFA) reached women somewhat later than it reached men, the gender gap in educational attainment has narrowed considerably, and by 1970, the percentage of illiteracy declined to 18.8% for men and 29.7% for women (Sieverding, 2012).

With Egypt's involvement in two wars in the 1970s combined with the fall of oil prices in 1980s, the country came under increasing fiscal pressure during those decades and eventually the government was forced to adopt the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program in 1991 (Sallam, 2015a). These challenges negatively affected

access to education, especially for girls in rural areas, where the illiteracy rate increased again to 44.4% over twenty-year period in 1970s and 1980s (Sallam, 2015a; Sieverding, 2012). Sallam (2015a) asserts that these challenges, coupled with the emergence of (EFA), facilitated the involvement of international organizations in the non-formal education of girls through such programs as the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative in Egypt (UNGEI) and the Ishraq program by the Population Council. Finally, while the preceding discussion address mainly the formal education, non-formal education became more salient in the 1970s with the emergence of development aid programs in Egypt as non-formal education covered mainly through development programs. More discussion on non-formal education provided in the following section on development and aid programs.

Women's public participation in Egypt

While most feminist literature that examines the relationship between modernity and gender in the Arab context tends to rely on a framework of East versus West, such a framework omits the indigenous discourses of inequality and difference as part of complex religious-class-gender subjectivities that may provide specify to women in the region (El Saadawi, 2007). In tracing women's participation in public life in Egypt, Ramadan (2012) provides two different perspectives: the imagined woman and the physical woman. The former draws on the notion of imagined communities, as developed by Anderson (2006), which explains how a nation is a socially constructed community of people who have never been in face-to-face contact with each other. In contrast, the latter refers to reality constructed through face-to-face communication. Ramadan (2012) argues

that several factors intersected in complex ways to constitute the Egyptian woman as an imagined political subject. These factors include colonialism, nationalism, vision of modernity, the emergence of new regimes of power and regulatory institutions, and class consolidation. in addition, Ramadan suggesting that actual lived realities of women are different.

Women's participation in public life has manifested in different ways since its emergence through women's activism in the early twentieth century nationalist movement in Egypt. In 1919, leading feminist activists such as Huda Sha'arawi and Safiyya Zaghlul mobilized women during protests to end British colonial occupation and demanded national independence for Egypt. Despite this early involvement of women in public life per se, some scholars argue that women were excluded as full citizens; such involvement was exclusively the purview of upper class women, and often only those from the secular elite who were in control (El Saadawi, 2007; Obermeyer, 1992; Ramadan, 2012).

Women's roles in Egypt have been influenced to a great extent by the different political regimes in the country's contemporary history. The socialist regime of president Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952-1970) adopted feminist policies to encourage women to modernize and to promote women's productive roles through entrance into education and the workforce. The 1956 constitution granted women the right to vote and run for public office, and secured equal rights to education and employment (Helal, 2005, Ramadan, 2012; Vatikiotis, 1991). Although gender discrimination was forbade by law in the 1956 constitution, Ramadan (2012) argues it also situated women's role in the family to avoid

necessary reform to the personal status law that may clash with the sharia—Islamic law. The economic liberalization policy of the consecutive regimes of Anwar Al-Sadat (1970-1981) and Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011), however, abandoned the commitment to state feminism. Because of the end of the welfare state, the economic liberalization policy has had negative consequences on state feminism, gender roles and relations, and women's citizenship, and women have suffered the most from its effects (Assaad & Krafft, 2015; Ramadan 2012). Economic liberalization created more polarized class differences among women especially those directly affected by such policy (women who run their own business or in a family that run business), which in turn had negative effects on gender roles and women's citizenship. One consequence of the policy is the huge variation in socioeconomic statutes between social classes. Discrimination against women and women's social roles is not only a practice by other sex and power institutions, Ramadan (2012) argues, discrimination against women "also mediated by their class affiliations and the power tensions emerging from them" (p. 40).

Although not codified in a law, gender relations in Egyptian society are defined by practices of control that construct masculinity and femininity where domination of men ultimately affects social hierarchies. This hierarchy then informs social norms and becomes an integral part of everyday lives in the society (El Saadawi, 2007). Although patriarchy and its social norms create restrictions for young women, young men are also affected by such norms where they are unable to fully perform their own gendered role. However, men's roles are mostly absent within the discussion of gender equity in development initiatives in MENA region (Shirazi, 2015). The end of the welfare state in

1970s and the adoption of economic liberalization policies contributed to the high rate of unemployment among young men and women, though the latter are to suffer the most (Assaad & Krafft, 2015). This contributed to a marriage crisis, especially linked to the high cost of marriage in the Egyptian societies (Rashad, Osman, & Roudi-Fahimi, 2005).

In rural Egypt, as in most Muslim and Arab societies, Ramadan (2012) argues there is no other sanctioned social alternative to marriage. Marriage is one of the most important social events in the lives of young people in Egypt. Marriage, therefore, is not only a key milestone for young people to become adults, but also a key for public participation, especially for young women. Marriage, according to Ramadan, is conceived as a prerequisite for public participation where social norms set no obligation on men as they prepare for marriage as such important social event and set social shame on girls who go out of their parents' home for any other reasons than education and work. In some rural society, the latter still unjustified where the social norms set no obligation on women in contributing to family earning (Ramadan, 2012). Ramadan argues "Marriage as an institution plays a significant role in reproducing gender ideology when it turns Egyptian men and women into husbands and wives, and designates the way both sexes should act in their society and nation" (p. 22). Marriage, therefore, turns young woman from a girl into an adult, as the cultural meaning of adulthood is still defined by marriage (Rashad, Osman, & Roudi-Fahimi, 2005). Until she is married, a woman retains the socially ascribed status of being a girl no matter if she is 18 or 80 (Ramadan, 2012). In addition to these social restrictions, women also suffer the limited access to a safe space that is appropriate to participate in their public life (Brady, 2005).

While the adoption of economic liberalization policy in 1970s was accompanied by an increased role for civil society, scholars argue that civil society organizations in Egypt are co-opted by the authoritarian regime and are ineffective, as they do not bring visible change to individuals' lives, especially less-advantaged young women (Albrecht, 2013; Kassem, 2004). In addition, civil society organizations as one avenue of participation for women in Egypt are mostly located in metropolitan areas and play a superficial role that only benefits elite women in those areas (Abu-Lughod, 2010). In rural areas, youth centers represent another form of civil society and are a place for young people's public participation. Brady (2005) argues that young women in rural Egypt have much less access to these centers and are completely excluded in some societies where culture and social norms restrict such public places for men only. In this way, Brady (2005) argues, "public space de facto becomes men's space" (p. 40).

Development and aid programs

Over the last four decades, Egypt hosted an extensive number of development programs funded by Western and international organizations. Most of these programs intended to help in areas related to democratization, gender equality, youth participation, and human rights, applying strategies conceived largely to influence post-communist transitions and political liberalization (Carapico, 2002). Among the largest development funders, Carapico (2002) notes, were the World Bank, USAID, Canada's Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and its Scandinavian counterparts, and the foreign ministries of the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

After the ratification of the peace treaty with Israel in 1978 that is known as the Camp David Peace Agreement, Egypt became the second largest recipient of the United States' foreign aid (Snider & Faris, 2011). Women and youth civic engagement is one of the main foci of the aid (after military aid that constitutes about two third of the aid according to Snider and Faris). Civic engagement and civic education, however, gained more attention and prioritized in U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of September 11 in 2001, especially after President George W. Bush announced a new set of civic education programs. This new set of civic engagement and civic education programs was not only aimed at young people in the United States, but also young people in the Middle East. This was reflected in U.S. foreign policy' democracy promotion and war on terror through the establishment of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in 2004. MEPI is a regional program located at the Embassy of the United States in Cairo to provide a wide range of development programs and grants to support youth participation and local civic education initiatives in Egypt and the region. However, civic education, especially in public education, maybe an area where authoritarian regimes maintain their hegemony to promote their legitimate role and lack of democracy as argued by Gross (2015) who notes that education (which according to Gross is not limited to classroom) is one aspect of where authoritarian regimes sought their legitimacy beside law, culture and religion. This supports the idea of informal avenues of participation where quality of civic education in authoritarian context, as discussed above in the context of the study, is unsatisfactory.

Despite the notable improvement by development programs since 1990, gender inequality remains a major barrier to women and girls' human development in Egypt. According to the 2015 Human Development Report issued by the United Nations Development Program, Egypt has a Gender Inequality Index (GII), value of 0.573, ranking it 131 out of 155 countries (United Nations, 2015b). This reflects gender-based inequalities in three dimensions – reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity. The GII can be interpreted as the loss in human development due to inequality between female and male achievements in the three GII dimensions (United Nations, 2015b). At this stage, it is pertinent to note that there has been some progress on women's empowerment such as access to education, women's rights and employment, nevertheless, the gap in these measures between women's lives in metropolitan and rural communities remains huge. Development reports on women status in the region, report that rural young women tend to be amongst the most marginalized and deprived groups of women not only in Egypt but in most of North Africa and Middle East region (Salem, Ibrahim, & Brady, 2003; Sayre, 2016).

Women in rural communities, especially young women's, specific needs and concerns are rarely reflected in national government policies, plans and budgets and there are only the most minimal levels of security and welfare support in place to protect them. This is in part due to their isolation and lack of safe space for public participation particularly at grassroots levels (Brady, 2005).

Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in Egypt is one of the major areas of intervention of international development agencies in Egypt. For example,

the USAID works to enhance women's and girls' civic and political rights and participation in their communities, in addition to building informal networks between Egyptian women in their communities and between Egyptian women and their counterparts in other countries. In addition to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment across all sectors of its work in Egypt, the USAID in Egypt devoted an explicit development goal to "Enhancing women's and girls' civic participation and political rights" (USAID, 2016) through all other development sectors. *Neqdar Nesharek* program is one of these development programs that funded by the USAID.

Another example is the priority given to women and gender equality by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The Swedish aid, which is the largest worldwide in percentage of GDP, policy framework clearly states that women and gender equality a continence priority and that development cooperation, according to (SIDA, 2016), should be characterized by a consistent gender perspective. Women are highlighted as a priority target group in all Swedish cooperation strategies in Egypt and MENA region. This commitment is clearly reflected in SIDA's five-year development strategy 2016-2021 and as part of Sweden's Policy for Global Development and has been a thematic priority since 2007 (SIDA, 2016).

International development organizations promoted development and education policies to use informal social networks as a vehicle to increase the civic engagement of less-advantaged women in developing countries, assuming that development programs offer social networks that play a pedagogical role, as a form of informal learning. The *Neqdar Nesharek* program in rural Egypt is one example of such entrepreneurship-

training development programs that was carried out to increase participation of less-advantaged young women in public life in rural Egypt.

The Neqdar Nesharek Program

Enhancing Livelihood Opportunities for Young Women in Rural Upper Egypt: The *Neqdar Nesharek* Program (which means "We Can Participate" in Arabic) was a four-year entrepreneurship-training program developed by the Population Council and implemented between 2011 and 2014. The *Neqdar Nesharek* program aimed to provide a safe space for 4,786 marginalized young women ages 16-29 in poorer villages of rural Egypt who have limited educational opportunities where they can meet and find the support they need to seek employment. The *Neqdar Nesharek* program funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and carried out by the Population Council in partnership with three community development organizations in 30 villages in three governorates: Fayoum, Qena, and Sohag in rural Upper Egypt.

The rational of *Neqdar Nesharek* program to target marginalized young women in rural Egypt, fueled by the several forms of gendered discrimination and inequality that young women in rural Upper Egypt face. Furthermore, gender gaps in educational enrollment and high dropout rates, early marriage, and persistence of unmet need in reproductive health and family planning services, shape the life options and well-being of rural women in Egypt. Another form of gender discrimination that contribute to the rationale of *Neqdar Nesharek* program, according to the Population Council, is the difficulties that young women in rural areas face participating in the public sphere, where the "arrival of puberty decreases a girl's access to friends and her freedom to move

around the community" (Ramadan, Abdel-Tawab, Elsayed, & Roushdy, 2014, p. 1). While restrictive cultural norms in Egypt often prevent young women from working and the employment rate of young women in rural Egypt is less than 6%, *Neqdar Nesharek* provided activities including life skills, business education, vocational training, and training on problem-solving to help women in rural communities enter labor market. The *Neqdar Nesharek* program, according to the Population Council, aims to achieve the following six goals:

1. Empower young rural Upper Egyptian women economically by providing them with business skills and support that enables them to join an existing business or start a business, including access to microfinance and markets, registration and licensing, and other logistics;
2. Empower young rural Upper Egyptian women socially and politically by providing them with life skills and an understanding of their rights and responsibilities as citizens;
3. Promote community acceptance of women's work and engagement in the public sphere and in community activities;
4. Develop a cadre of promoters that will provide sustainable support to beneficiaries who are capable of leading livelihood programs in the future;
5. Build the capacity of village-based CDAs in administrative, financial management, and vocational training programs, and enable them to run livelihood programs in the future; and

6. Create new jobs at the governorate and village levels.

Finally, my choice of *Neqdar Nesharek* program as a means to examine the phenomenon of social networks and women's civic engagement is motivated by its ability to provide me with the data and access to less-advantaged young women where it was implemented in the rural communities in Fayoum. In addition, the long involvement of the Population Council in the development of young women and being an international NGO are important factors that informed my choice.

Significance of the Study

Our understanding of women's civic participation in Egypt remains incomplete if we do not pay attention to the informal civic learning and participation; similarly, our examination of women's informal participation is incomplete if we do not understand how women appropriate these alternative unconventional avenues to advance their participation in a context as such.

This study generates deep understanding of the pedagogical role that informal civic learning plays within informal self-created social networks. The study explores how young women in marginalized, and conservative rural societies construct new civic and sociopolitical engagement and relationships beyond their families and school. In addition, the case study at the heart of this dissertation provides compelling data to challenge claims of engagement made by large scale studies that impose universal measures of civic participation. Furthermore, the study uniquely questions and sheds light on the current challenges in measuring women agency, specifically to their political, social and

community engagement, in developing countries by troubling the long-existed SES model and other epistemological approaches such as the quantitative approach of SYPE. The revision of SES and SYPE provides basis for a different analytical framework to measure empowerment and women agency in rural societies.

The outcomes of this study contribute to theory and practice in the field of comparative international education, international development policy, political socialization, and women and gender studies. It makes an original contribution to the growing body of literature on women's participation, where most published studies about women's participation in rural Egypt, according to Abu-Lughod (2010, 2013), are written in the West and are mainly a combination of stereotypes and generalizations about how Arab women are oppressed and subjugated. The study fulfils the need pointed out by Abu-Lughod (2010) to understand the dynamic of the everyday social lives of women in rural Egypt. While Abu-Lughod (2013) noted the lack of field research on women's participation in rural Egypt because researchers are unable to gain access to Egyptian households and mirror their understanding based on their Western views of participation, this study directly incorporates perspectives of less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt.

In addition, while Lowndes (2004) asserts that "women have as much social capital as men" (p. 61), the relationship between women's social capital and civic engagement in the Arab region and in rural Egypt in particular remains ambiguous, and there is a need for further research (Lowndes, 2004; Morrow, 1999). This study, therefore, makes an original contribution to the growing body of literature on social

capital. Social capital, especially that of young women in rural areas and in relation to civic engagement, is a relatively new concept in scholarship on the Arab world, and there is limited research devoted to examining women's social capital, especially of those women in marginalized rural societies in Egypt.

Furthermore, the outcomes of this study help bridge the gap between theory and practice concerning education and the participation of women in developing countries. Salem, Ibrahim, and Brady (2003) note how little attention is given to local communities and how young women practice citizenship given the history of top-down democratization efforts in the region in general and in Egypt in particular. On the one hand, most studies on education in Egypt address access to education, educational attainment, or the economic value of education, but less on the social return of education, particularly on informal learning for marginalized young women in rural communities (Megahed & Lack, 2011; Zaalouk, 2004). The studies that do exist primarily examine the link between the education of young women and their employability (Assaad & Krafft, 2015). On the other hand, the few studies that examine the relationship between education and civic engagement of young people in Egypt focus on young men and typically on voting and political participation (Salem, Ibrahim, & Brady, 2003).

Finally, coming from the development field, I saw firsthand the crucial need for research on development policies and strategies that aim at greater and equal representation of women in public life and on the utility of unconventional solutions that provide equal and equitable learning opportunities for less-advantaged women in developing countries. The field is in urgent need of educational policy recommendations

that are theoretically and empirically grounded and practically viable, where educational research blends scientific research with systematic development and implementation of solutions to educational problems (McKenney & Reeves, 2012). This study, therefore, is advancing the understanding of informal civic learning of social networks in relation to women's civic engagement in rural Egypt, and not only contributes to the scholarship of this field and informs educational and development policy debates, but also contributes to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Summary

This introductory chapter outlines the research problem and its significance by providing an overview of the conceptual framework. The key theoretical concepts and research questions of this study examine the role of informal civic learning through informal social networks in relation to young women's civic and political participation. The following chapter situates this study in its fields by providing a review of relevant literature.

Organization of the study

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 states the problem and its context, historical background, the purpose of the study, and the conceptual framework used to guide research. Chapter 2 presents a literature review of four areas that inform the research questions by situating the problematic of this study theoretically, epistemologically and historically in relevant fields. The first area of literature, *civic engagement as social capital*, examines how social capital generated within networks

may facilitate the process of informal learning. The second area, *limits of participation in civil society*, is chosen because it examines how women's self-created social networks, as an informal form of civil society, relate to women's civic engagement where formal channels are co-opted by an authoritarian regime. The third area, *informal learning and civic knowledge*, provides a discussion of multiple perspectives on women's experiences as a form of informal learning. Finally, the last area, *informal participation in the Middle East*, discusses how less-advantaged citizens in the Middle East region appropriate unconventional avenues to advance their involvement in public life. These four areas of literature provide the theoretical framework that guides the research and provides a foundation for the theory that emerges from the data analysis.

Following the discussion of literature, Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology for this study. Guided by the primary objective of this study—understanding the relationship between informal social networks and women's civic engagement—the choice of data collection and data analysis methods and procedures for this qualitative study was governed by a constructivist paradigm assumption. In addition to the methodological consideration, the chapter discusses the sampling, data collection, and data analysis for this study. Qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 49 participants were the primary source of data collection for this study. I utilized a combination of open-ended research methods to examine the everyday lived experiences of young, rural women in their villages in Fayoum, including: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observation.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the findings of the study. In Chapter 4, I argue that the conventional avenues for participation (e.g., youth centers, civil and political institutions, elections) are not an option for young women in rural Fayoum. The chapter attempts to answer the first research question—how do young women in Fayoum understand the social and political issues that impact their lives and identities within their communities. The chapter discusses two major discourses surrounding young women that are related to their political and civic engagement in rural communities in the selected three villages in Fayoum: constraining discourses and encouraging discourses. Chapter 4 also discusses the tensions between these two discourses and demonstrates the clear distinctions made by women between their intentional decision not to participate in state civic activities and their participation in civic activities related to the problems of their local villages.

Chapter 5 answers the question—how young women understand their experiences of their self-created women groups in relation to their civic learning. In this chapter, I argue that self-created women groups can be an alternative to formal avenues offered by the state. The chapter discusses the informal civic learning of rural young women as a socio-cultural phenomenon. The chapter also demonstrates how these individually constructed social networks operate as unconventional avenues of learning that equip women with knowledge and skills as pedagogical pathways to civic engagement. Chapter 5 demonstrates a six-stage learning process where women informally learn and apply their learning toward civic issues in their networks. It starts with action where young women involve themselves in social interaction within their individually constructed

social networks and ends with learning from their civic action. Chapter 6 answers the third research question—how are these young women drawing upon and applying what they learned. In this chapter, I argue that these unconventional avenues are viable in advancing women's civic engagement and agency. The chapter demonstrates vivid examples of civic participation residing outside of conventional political domains. In contrast to previous quantitative research, the analysis of these civic examples shows that rural women are not only active in local civics, but also active participants in the public political domain. Chapter 6 highlights women's personal and collective agency and illustrates how their affiliation with networks and civic action provides the instrumental trajectory needed to achieve recognition and empowerment. Furthermore, the chapter highlights women's narratives on their ground-up collective nature of civic and political decision-making.

Finally, the Chapter 7 presents the main findings of this study and examines their implications for scholarship in comparative education and international development studies as well as for development and education policies. Chapter 7 answers the question—how do the experiences of young women participating in their local civic and political decision compare with mainstream accounts of civic participation in Egypt. The discussion of the chapter provides analysis and theorization on the role of social networks in generating social capital and how this social capital relate to women's civic learning and engagement. In addition, the chapter provides important distinction between women's informal civic learning process and formal schooling. The chapter concludes with the significance of the study and future directions for research.

Chapter Two: Literature review

The organization of the chapter is informed with great extent by the question about the phenomenon of women participation mentioned in the beginning of the preceding chapter—why do less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt, who are generally not engaged in public life, tend to participate more in civic activities in their society when they affiliate with a social network. The following review, therefore, examines how the literature variously frames how less-advantaged young women advance their political ends outside of traditional formal civil society.

Introduction

Civic engagement of less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt faces several challenges in a context identified as established authoritarian and patriarchal social norms where young women have limited educational opportunities. The preceding chapter highlights the inadequate scholarly attention on the role of informal social networks in relation to women's civic engagement, especially among rural young women in developing countries where there is paucity of literature and several questions remain unanswered. This chapter reviews relevant literature in order to examine first how social capital generated within networks facilitates the process of informal learning; second, how informal learning within networks relates to women's civic engagement; and, finally, how less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt appropriate these informal networks to advance their involvement in public life.

The aim of this critical review of relevant literature is to situate the problematic of this study theoretically, epistemologically and historically in the field of education and

public participation. I review four bodies of literature in order to situate this study topic in relevant literature and to address gaps within the literature for further study. The first body of literature is *civic engagement and social capital* in which I examine the role of social capital as a means and end that may facilitate civic engagement as response to the limits of civil society. The second body is *limits of participation in civil society* where civil society is fundamental for civic engagement and it is important to examine how authoritarianism puts limits for participation in civil society. The third body is *informal learning and civic knowledge* where civic knowledge and skills are prerequisite for civic engagement and most less-advantaged young women have limited access to educational opportunities. The last body is *informal participation in the Middle East* region because formal channels of participation may be affected by the authoritarian context and may not be appropriate to less-advantaged young women who have limited access to educational opportunities. I conclude the chapter by presenting gaps and possible research directions.

Civic Engagement and Social Capital

In the past few decades the concept of social capital has been applied by an increasingly large number of scholars in various fields to explain outcomes such as educational attainment, health status, economic prosperity, and democratic participation. Social capital represents one approach to understanding the effects of informal social networks through the patterns of interdependence and social interactions. This body examines the ways that relevant scholarship defines and discusses social capital in relation to knowledge and skills learned through informal social networks in order to situate civic engagement in the realm of social capital. The social capital concept stems

from the idea that social resources such as peers and families can be of value to learning for young people especially for those with limited access to ordinary educational opportunities like the case of less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt.

The conceptualization of social capital by the American sociologist Coleman (1988) is widely used in the literature of education, political science, and sociology since early 1980s. Coleman's conceptualization of social capital in the creation of human capital becomes one of the most salient concepts used in education and social sciences, and it generally refers to the norms that social structures develop to facilitate cooperation and to provide resources for persons that help achieve certain goals (Coleman, 1988). Coleman argues that there is a relationship between level of social capital of young people and their educational outcomes where social capital can be used as a determining factor of educational outcomes. Using family as an example of social structure, Coleman adds that the strong the network relations the less the disparity in educational outcomes where young people with strong family ties and more stable family do better than their counterparts with less family ties where parents may be divorced. Similarly, Campbell and Hurlbert (1986) describe the "network-as-resources" (p. 97) where personal networks serve as a means of production of better conditions of life for their members. Coleman's (1988) assertion, from the one hand, shows the emphasis on the importance of social structure and social gatherings as vehicle to connect young people to available resources in a social structure per se. On the other hand, it shows his functionalist epistemology as he defines social capital by its function through two components: social network and social interactions. Despite the importance of Coleman's conceptualization of social

capital in facilitating learning through knowledge and skills transfer within social networks, the functionalist epistemology does not align to my research epistemology.

Similarly, Putnam (1995) defines social capital with a functionalist epistemology as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit” (p. 67). This definition illustrates the three main components of social capital: trust, social norms, and social networks. Coleman (1988) notes that all social relations facilitate some form of social capital, especially in certain kinds of social structures (e.g. social networks) and distinguishes between two types of social networks, networks with and without intergenerational closure. In a closure structure model, peer members develop norms around each other’s behavior and shared expectations that help to monitor and guide behaviors. As such, closure of social structure is important not only to maintain effective norms but also to provide trustworthiness of social structure as a form of social capital, as I will discuss later. This idea of maintaining effective norms and trustworthiness of social structure is aligned to the rational of “safe space” by *Neqdar Nesharek* program by the Population Council and the USAID for young women in rural Egypt. While closure might be necessary or important to establish trust among young women, it may not be sufficiently facilitative if it is limited in numbers or class. Closure may limit the learning to the aggregated existed knowledge of young women, as members of a “closure” type of network, which assumed by the *Neqdar Nesharek* program to be low. In other words, according to Coleman, this means that social capital of young women in closure network will help transfer the already limited knowledge and skills brought to the network by

young women only. Although the “closure” type of network by Coleman is important to maintain effective norms and trustworthiness which is coined as “safe space” in *Neqdar Nesharek* program, it may not bring new knowledge to the network other than those brought in by young women.

In contrast, Bourdieu (1986) considered social capital as the assets of the members of the dominant class and stated that people’s participation in a personal network permits them access to all the resources available through this network and this, more precisely, constitutes their social capital. Bourdieu emphasizes the power of individuals within social relations to advance their benefits. In this regard, Bourdieu argued that individuals utilize social capital as a moral resource in struggles within different social arenas.

While Bourdieu defines social capital similar to Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995) as access to resources, he criticized how social capital is associated with middle-class or upper-class values and this does not fit with Coleman’s approach to social capital. Bourdieu’s critique is useful in understanding less-advantaged rural young women and the kind of social capital they value and need, rather than the kind of social capital they do or do not gain from schooling. In addition, while the social network of the USAID *Neqdar Nesharek* program is not open for all less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt as it has particular target, it is important to understand how such young women can expand their social capital beyond the “closure” type network. Furthermore, Bourdieu’s critique is important to understand if the social capital is expandable to other less-advantaged rural women who do not have the same chance to join social networks in

such pilot programs like the *Neqdar Nesharek* program or does the program reproducing the marginalization among less-advantaged young women by creating different classes.

What are the different forms of social capital and how does it generate? Coleman (1988) postulates three forms of social capital to explain how such social relations constitute useful capital resources for individuals. The first form includes obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structure. Coleman notes two parts that constitute the first form: trustworthiness and obligation towards members, and asserts the importance of trust that ensures obligations will be repaid. This shows a relationship between level of obligation and social capital: "individuals in social structures with high level of obligations outstanding at any time, have more social capital on which they can draw" (Coleman, 1988, p. S103). Putnam (1993) adds that trust helps create reciprocity and civic associations and in return, reciprocity and civic associations create trust. Such a virtuous circle "results in social equilibrium manifesting itself in a high level of cooperation, expanding trust, civic activity, and collective well-being" (p. 177). On the other hand, a breaking in trust in the circle results in disorder and lack of civic community "trust comes from two related sources: norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement" (p, 171). However, the networks of civic engagement on which Putnam (1993) builds this argument, consist mainly of sports clubs and cultural associations in Northern Italy, which may not capture the community I am studying in rural Egypt. In addition, Coleman and Putnam's postulations of trust and reciprocity may constitute anther limitation to social capital for less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt. On the one hand, trust may put obligation on less-advantaged young women that

they cannot commit given the oppressive social norms practiced particularly on young women as discussed in the historical context of the study in Chapter One. On the other hand, the assumption on which social networks of *Neqdar Nesharek* program was designed is that less-advantaged young women lack knowledge and skills where they join the network to gain. This means that if a young woman does not contribute to the resource been shared between members within network (e.g. knowledge and skills), that will lead to a break in the virtuous circle and social equilibrium and then affect the civic community as argued by Putnam. This poses a functional limitation of social capital for less-advantaged young women and a threat that such event may contribute to discriminate against young woman who unintentionally breaks the cycle. Bourdieu's (1986) critique is important here in understanding if trust and reciprocity are as valuable for rural young women as it is for middle class young people.

Information channels represent a second form of social capital. Information, Coleman (1988) notes, is important in providing a basis for action, but obtaining information entails additional cost. Individuals in a social network, however, can share information and knowledge with minimal or no costs to each other. This form of social capital facilitates actions that create human capital—knowledge and tools that enhance individual productivity (Putnam, 1995). Information and knowledge sharing as such align to the concept of transformative learning in social action by Foley (1999), as a form of informal learning. Foley highlights the pedagogical dimension of informal social networks and asserts the significance of such social gatherings where "learning occurs informally and incidentally, in people's everyday lives" (p. 95). Furthermore, Coleman

(1988) notes the connection between social capital and human capital within networks and asserts that in a network, sharing of social capital gives members access to each other's knowledge and skills through social interactions and absence of these interactions means the social capital is missing or is not circulating and utilized efficiently. This may be relevant to the attempt to understand the pedagogical role of informal social networks, offered by *Neqdar Nesharek* program, in providing knowledge and skills required for rural women who have limited access to other educational opportunities. In this context, Coleman asserts that shared benefit is what distinguishes social capital from other forms of capital, e.g. human capital. While the latter directly benefits the person who invests in this form of capital, the benefit of social capital does not necessarily benefit primarily the person who brought it into being for a group of people in a network. Rather social capital provides indirect mutual benefits to those who are members of such network (Coleman, 1988). Social capital, therefore, augments the returns of investment in human capital and is a cumulative resource that grows as it is used (Coleman, 1988). Knowledge and skills provided by the network, therefore, is a key to facilitate individuals' engagement in civic life (Coleman, 1988; Lake, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Putnam, 2000). This is significant to my research, as most young women in rural Egypt have poor access to quality formal education and lack the knowledge required to participate actively in civic activities of their society. In addition, this provision of knowledge and skills adds value to the informal social networks to serve as avenues of civic learning as I discuss in the findings in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

The third form of social capital includes norms and effective sanctions. Norms in social structures include rewards and sanctions where Coleman (1988) notes that social capital includes productive norms that facilitate positive actions. Norms as part of social capital within social structure according to Coleman, however, is not clear what kind of norm that facilitate particular action and who set these norms. In rural communities in Egypt, young women come to social networks with set of norms that are socially constructed norms and may contradict those norms within networks. One example could be the age concern which may not be a factor within a network but an important one within young women's families where most relations based on respect of age difference.

Educational aspiration and educational outcome is another dimension of social capital by Halpern (2005). Halpern introduces educational aspirations as a mediating factor between social capital and educational outcomes—knowledge and skills that individuals have attained as a result of their involvement in a particular set of educational experiences (O'Neill, 2006)—arguing that high expectations among peers in social networks can encourage and inspire members of networks. Halpern (2005) notes the importance of social capital in lowering barriers to knowledge transfer within social networks and asserted, "it boosts learning, and such learning should not be viewed through the lens of school alone" (p. 169). Halpern (2005) emphasizes that much of what people know is tacit knowledge where they pick up knowledge from their everyday lives and friends. In addition, peer interactions and positive feedback within social networks increase aspirations and encourage members to aim high to achieve (Halpern, 2005). While education helps generate social capital and social capital helping foster educational

outcomes, lack of community social capital at macro level may add to students' educational disadvantage. Halpern notes that social experiences explain that link and asserted, "many governments are active in seeking to strengthen this socializing effect through citizenship education and volunteering programs… [where] social networks and high expectations can stretch, encourage and inspire a child" (p. 168). The role of educational inspiration between peers in social networks to encourage individuals to utilize the knowledge they gain through transformation to achieve high may align to the aim of this study; that attempts to assess the pedagogical role of social networks in relation to young women's civic engagement albite Halpern's focus is on schooling. In addition, Halpern's argument does not address the case when young woman belongs to a society within which social norms encourage young women to prioritize marriage over several other things as the case in rural Egypt discussed earlier in this study context.

Social capital, Democracy, and Political Participation

Social capital can be important for democracy. Fukuyama (2002) introduces another perspective of social capital in relation to civic engagement and asserts that social capital is a key ingredient in stable democracy and defines social capital in a broad sense as including "any instance in which people cooperate for common ends on the basis of shared norms and values" (p. 23). Fukuyama emphasizes the critical role of social capital to combat authoritarianism and to support democracy: "Social capital is what permits individuals to band together to defend their interests and organize to support collective needs; authoritarian governance, on the other hand, thrives on social atomization" (p. 26). However, in order for social capital to play such a role toward democracy, Fukuyama

asserts the importance of effective civil society for participation "no civil society, no democracy" (p. 26). Similarly, Putnam (2000) highlights the central role of civil society not only in the production of social capital but as a precondition for democratization. Despite this important mediating role between civil society and democracy by social capital, preceding review highlights that civil society in Egypt is co-opted by the authoritarian regime. This, however, emphasizes the intention of this study to examine social capital within informal avenues to assess if it permits less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt to band together to defend their interests and organize to support collective needs as argued above by Fukuyama.

In the same spirt of the relationship between social capital and democracy, Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) introduce politically relevant social capital as another form of social capital. In addition to the provision of human capital through knowledge and skills transfer between members, Lake and Huckfeldt argue that social capital in personal social networks generates politically relevant social capital. The politically relevant social capital per se is a byproduct generated through social interactions in networks. Lake and Huckfeldt define it as the politically relevant social capital as the "consequence of political expertise and information that is regularly communicated within an individual's network of social relations" (p. 570). Similar to the positive relationship between education and political participation posited by Downs (1957), Lake and Huckfeldt demonstrate the connection between social networks and the likelihood for greater engagement of individuals. They noted that the politically relevant social capital together with human capital generated in a network can reduce the cost of participation—the time

and effort reading about candidates or public issues to make informed decisions in elections (Downs, 1957)—and accordingly motivate civic engagement. These authors argue that when citizens choose to join a network, they have the chance to meet new people, develop social relationships and engage more in civic life. Therefore, increasing the level of politically relevant social capital enhances the likelihood of increasing the civic engagement of members within a network.

This view of social capital is with great importance to my study, as it tends to examine how affiliation of young women with an informal social network through *Neqdar Nesharek* program may provide the civic knowledge and skills to advance involvement of young women in public life. Despite the focus of my study is only on women participation in civic activities that may not exclude to political activities Lake and Huckfeldt's (1998) argument is useful in understanding the relationship between social networks and civic engagement. However, in a "closure" type network as asserted by Coleman (1988), which is important to ensure effective norms and trustworthiness where every member hold accountable to the rest, informal social network of less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt may lack the political expertise and information as noted by Lake and Huckfeldt's (1998) above. Yet, this is important as it highlights the importance to examine whether an expert and informative member is important to join the network or not or who can provide this information within such a group.

Despite the potential importance of social capital to enhance civic engagement, there is little written on the social capital of women. In one of the few studies with such a focus, a survey by Lowndes (2004) considers the utility of social capital in studying the

differences in civic engagement among women and men in Britain. Lowndes (2004) concludes that "women have as much social capital as men" (p. 61) but the likelihood of women investing their social capital in politics may differ from men, as women's social capital is "more strongly embedded in neighborhood-specific networks of informal sociability" (p. 61). Lowndes argues that household responsibilities might be a reason that women are less engaged in public life. However, the question of the relationship between social capital and civic engagement for women in Middle East and rural Egypt in particular remains unanswered, and there is a need for further research.

In conclusion, the preceding review highlights several areas of utility of social capital theory to my research of informal social networks and women's civic engagement in rural Egypt, and highlights two limitations that must be noted. Social capital theory, as developed in the works of Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000), provides an important perspective of the function of social capital and its potential to enable women in rural Egypt to engage in public life. Coleman and Putnam talked more about what generates social capital but less on how to measure it. Furthermore, the idea of politically relevant social capital by Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) may provide plausible answer to the questions I posed in the introduction of this chapter on whether social networks provide informal learning and how such informal learning relates to women's civic engagement? However, the concept of social capital as formulated in a Western context may have some limitations in its applicability for a non-western context such as Egypt. Coleman's (1988) conception of social capital and the creation of human capital stemmed from a study of close bonds of students in Catholic schools, their families and community. While

the result of this study may be affected with other confounding variables such as the Catholic value of giving and helping, it may not be applicable in rural Egypt with dominant Muslim values without controlling such variables. Putnam (2000), for instance, uses civic engagement indicators developed by Tocqueville (1838), such as voter turnout, affiliation with Lions Club, and participation in choral societies to formulate the concept of social capital and to apply it in Northern Italy; such indicators may not resonate in non-western contexts such as rural Egypt. Likewise, Putnam (1993) applies the concept of social capital to civic organizations such as sports clubs and cultural associations, which may not exist in rural Egypt or may not be accessible to most women in rural areas. Finally, the scholarship of this section discusses the importance of formal civil society for social capital, and as such, social capital is dependent on the availability of effective civil society. This relationship between social capital and civil society poses a limitation on the utility of the concept of social capital in contexts such as Egypt, where civil society is co-opted by an authoritarian regime. While the idea of social capital deemed useful to my study that tends to examine informal social networks in rural Egypt, there is a need therefore to examine first, the limit of civil society in Egypt, and second, informal avenues in Muslim authoritarian context comparable to those used by Coleman and Putnam in the West. The following body, therefore, examines limits of participation in civil society.

Limits of Participation in Civil Society

Civil society is a sphere of social interaction between economy and state that provides growing list of activities, one of which is to provide avenue for participation and

to promote political and public participation (Cohen & Arato, 1992). The debate around civil society in the Middle East region, however, led some to argue that the region is void of civil society for different reasons include the authoritarian nature in most of the region, the contradict between civil society and Islam (Hamzawy, 2003). One reason for such debate not only in the Middle East but also on civil society as a concept is that "dynamics of civil society has remained opaque, in part because there is no sufficiently complex theory of civil society available to use today" (Cohen & Arato, 1992, p. viii). This body examines how literature addresses the concept of civil society as an avenue for civic engagement, including its evolution and definition, and highlights the contextual and regime constraints of civil society in the Middle East in general, and in Egypt in particular.

In the 1990s, most Arab countries witnessed an increase in civil society organizations (CSOs). For example, Bahrain and Yemen experienced a 400 and 1000 percent expansion in CSOs respectively, and by 2002, the number of CSOs in the region reached 130,000 (Yom, 2005). Egypt has nearly 23,000 registered CSOs (Krause, 2012). Nevertheless, civic engagement in the Middle East, especially among Arab youths, is low, especially compared to the West. Arab civil society, as an important avenue for civic engagement, as Yom (2005) notes, "suffer[s] from weak broad-based support and endemic fragmentation" (p. 19). Because of this, scholars disagree on whether civil society exists in the Middle East (Krause, 2012). On the one hand, scholars, including some Arab intellectuals, argue that civil society is absent in the Middle East (Abdelrahman, 2004; Albrecht, 2013; Hamzawy, 2003; Pratt, 2007). On the other hand,

Krause (2012) argues that civil society exists, even though it may be weak, and that these differences of opinions have emerged from a lack of clarity regarding the role and definition of civil society in the region as the following discussion illuminates. Therefore, this section reviews how literature characterizes the concept of civil society and its function. As the function of civil society, in general, is derived from the multiplicity of its autonomous spheres including economy, religion, culture, political activity, I limit the review of civil society functions only to this study topic: civic engagement.

Although the concept of civil society came to be increasingly realized in the course of the twentieth century (Yom, 2005), it was first mentioned by Aristotle in ancient philosophy, then introduced in the eighteenth century by Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, and in the nineteenth century by Georg Hegel (Shils, 1991). The concept became more popular in the West after the Cold War, by neo-Tocquevillian social scientists who claimed a positive relationship between civil society and democratization (Cohen & Arato, 1992). Since then, civil society has played a key role in increasing civic engagement and facilitating democratization. In this regard, Yom (2005) asserts that CSOs played a vital role in the collapse of authoritarian regimes in different regions (e.g., Central and East Europe, East Asia, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa), driving 50 out of 67 modern transitions from authoritarian rule; and, therefore, that civil society represents the “sine qua non of democracy” (p.15). The MENA region, however, was not affected by the rage in the 1990s and was not able to move toward democratization as other eastern successful democracies e.g. Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and the Baltic states (Bunce, 2000). The variation between regions per se,

according to Bunce (2000), was because while the successful eastern cases combined high desire and high capacity, the MENA region suffered the continuing power of the military, and the highly uncertain nature of these transitions.

Definition of Civil Society

Shils (1991) defines civil society as a part of society that has a life of its own, "distinctly different from the state" (p. 3), and includes non-state, not-for-profit, and voluntary institutions. Civil society, according to Shils (1991), requires a "distinctive set of political institutions [that] hedge about the state and delimit the scope of its activities and powers" (p. 10). While the definition does not focus on the state, Shils (1991) argues, "it presupposes a particular kind of state, namely, a state of limited powers" (p. 9). In this regard, the boundary of the autonomy of civil society, and in some cases its activities, is mostly regulated by the state (Cohen & Arato, 1992). Thus, the concept of power as a form of social control, theorized by Foucault (1980) as a means of control and resistance, is particularly useful for understanding the relationship of decision-making power between civil society and the state (as cited in Cohen & Arato, 1992).

Civil society complements the role of the state in different arenas and, as coined by Tocqueville (1838), serves as "free schools of democracy" (as cited in Foley & Edwards, 1996, p. 42) where individuals can exercise their rights and responsibilities. However, civil society for John Locke, who wavers between the term of commonwealth and the term of civil society, civil society involves activities distinct from living under government and imputes to society at large (Norton, 2001). CSOs, for example, educate individuals about the values of citizenship as well as the collective actions that include

active participation in their public life (Cohen & Arato, 1992). In addition, CSOs generate social capital and provide the "networks of civic engagement" (Foley & Edwards, 1996, p. 39). In this spirit, Putnam (2000) emphasizes the key role of civil society in the growth of democracy "by fostering norms of reciprocity, improving information flow, reducing opportunism, and, in general, highlighting people's trust in each other and political institution" (as cited in Hefner, 1998, p. 36).

Cohen and Arato (1992) defined civil society, as a sphere of social interaction with a certain extent of autonomy expanding from the family to the state, comprises of a combination of different institutions including associations, clubs, unions, syndicates, federations, political parties, and any group of people who come together to provide a buffer between citizens and state. The latter—a group of people—is the least recognized and researched form of civil society, though it plays an important role. Yom (2005) asserted that such informal "casual social groups and personal networks [are] more communally oriented than other CSOs and draw a stronger following among the poor… [and are] the richest source of civic vitality in the Arab world" (pp. 18-19). This form, casual social groups and personal networks, bears relevance for my research and I situate informal social networks, the focus of this study, under this form of civil society. Scholarship in the preceding review gives more to the function and component in identifying civil society but less on the relationship between state and civil society. Most of the tension in the debate about civil society, state, and democracy is about the boundary and mutual relationship between state and civil society where "only a democratic state can create a democratic civil society… [and] only a democratic civil

society can sustain a democratic state (Walzer, 1991, p. 9). Such discussion on the relationship per se is important especially in discussing civil society in the MENA region that is mostly ruled by authoritarian and military regimes.

The scholarship demonstrates a lack of clarity regarding what civil society means in the Arab world. Hamzawy (2003), for example, defines civil society narrowly, as a "democratic and secular sphere between authoritarian Arab states and movements of political Islam" (p. 33). This definition separates civil society from the authoritarian regimes and the radical Islamists, which comprises the heart of the controversy. As Yom (2005) argues, scholars are confused as to whether radical Islamist organizations in Middle East and elsewhere are considered part of civil society or not: "analysts have reached little consensus in defining civil society in the Arab context" (p. 14). Others believe that the Arab world is devoid of the function of a civil society altogether (Abdelrahman, 2004). While these depictions of civil society in the region are useful in understanding the nature of the controversy and the debate around civil society in the region as noted above by Krause (2012), the depiction, however, focuses only on a salient form of civil society (i.e. political institutions) and omits a wide range of CSOs (e.g. community development organizations). The depiction omits also an important form of civil society in the region (i.e. informal casual social groups) which, as asserted above by Yom (2005), is the most communally oriented form of civil society that is able to draw a stronger following among the poor and is the richest source of civic vitality in the region.

While the above controversial definition of civil society by Hamzawy (2003) may be striking, it may reflect the role of social movement by Islamist in the region. In Egypt

for example, Hopkins and Ibrahim (2001) assert that in some aspects Islamic movements are "outgunned by the state through over regulation" (p. 101). Hopkins and Ibrahim (2001) clarify that by contrasting the role plied by the state in promoting family planning to the role of Islamist against it:

> The state has the powerful official media, institutional and financial resources, some four thousand mother and child health clinics, and twenty thousand government mosques. [vs.] The Islamic activists have at least one opposition paper (*al-Sha'b*), forty thousand non-governmental mosques, and activists to distribute hundreds of thousands of cassette-tapes, with messages often attacking family planning programs as external plots against Muslims (p. 101).

The preceding quotation and discussion by Hopkins and Ibrahim (2001) may clarify the reasoning by Hamzawy (2003) of narrowing the definition of civil society in the Middle East to the secular sphere between authoritarian states and movements of political Islam in the region. However, the debate on civil society is still active and the question by Yom (2005) about whether radical Islamic organizations in Middle East and elsewhere are considered part of civil society or not remained unanswered.

Civil Society and State

The notion of civil society entails a political concept that allows individuals within voluntary associations to exercise power to advance their economic, social, and political interests. This is, however, contingent on the space of freedom and level of interference posed by the state (Cohen & Arato, 1992). As Krause (2012) notes, in an authoritarian context, as in most of the Middle East, some intellectuals support the idea that government should control civil society. In Egypt, despite the enormous number of CSOs, formal civil society is not completely separate from the state where the latter

interferes to delineate its role. Thus, scholars have argued that the majority of CSOs' activities in Egypt are ineffective, as they do not bring visible change to individuals' life, especially to less-advantaged young women (Abdelrahman, 2004; Abu-Lughod, 2010; Albrecht, 2013; McGann, 2008). Albrecht (2013) and McGann (2008) argue that authoritarianism and limited resources are among the major pitfalls for civil society in most of the Middle East, and Egypt in particular; even though there is a plethora of CSOs in Egypt, they do not play the role of civil society that some say they should. Albrecht (2013) argues that civil society in Egypt failed to both play a visible role against authoritarianism and to serve as an avenue for civic engagement. Similarly, Abu-Lughod (2010) asserts that Egyptian CSOs that focus on women's rights are mostly located in metropolitan areas and play a superficial nominal role that only benefits elite women in metropolitan areas. The focus of most of these CSOs, especially those salient ones supported by the regime, is not to promote demand-making policies and to enhance women's civic engagement. Rather they are utilized by the authoritarian regime as an instrument to reduce the pressure by the West and international organizations for gender equality and democratization (Abu-Lughod, 2010; Albrecht, 2013).

This argument explains the significance of informal casual groups (e.g. informal social networks created as a byproduct by *Neqdar Nesharek* program) in reaching out to the least-advantaged young women in rural Egypt who are not in the capture of CSOs that are already co-opted by the regime. It also shows the viability of informal casual groups to first, avoid the repression of authoritarian regime as they have less interference and control from the state compared to the formal civil society that is legally controlled

and supervised by the state. Second, to reach out to most marginalized groups with demand needed service not superficial activities dictated by the regime to enhance its image.

Furthermore, the above definition of civil society by Shils (1991) may reveal another limitation for civil society in the Middle East in general and in Egypt in particular. The definition highlights the importance of the separation between civil society and the state, where the latter should exercise limited power over the former. Limited interference from the state, Shils (1991) notes, is a precondition for effective civil society. The successive established authoritarian regimes since 1952 in Egypt, as argued by Kassem (2004) and Albrecht (2013), constitute a limitation for civil society because the state controls the scope, activities, and funding of CSOs. Additionally, civil society lacks safeguard institutions such as free media and an independent judiciary, as they are also co-opted by the authoritarian regime. Such institutions are vital in protecting civil society from the encroachment of the state by endorsing the rule of law to protect the liberty of individuals and institutions (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Shils, 1991).

Culture and religions may contribute to represent another limitation for civil society in the region, especially for women. Krause (2012) notes that Arab intellectuals argue that civil society is a social phenomenon idealized with a Western lens and may not exist in Arab society with the same term. Furthermore, they doubt the appropriateness of the term in the Middle East as it may contradict cultural and religious values, such as women's roles in society. In this regard, Krause (2012) notes that some Arab intellectuals reject the term civil society (*mujtamah al-madani*) while arguing that the Arabic term

mujtamah al-ahli, which means “popular community,” (p. 46) has more utility for the region. However, evaluating this Arabic term in relation to women’s civic engagement, Hamzawy (2003) asserts that the term has “nothing in regard to women’s interests” (p. 38) and, therefore, does not capture the possibility for women. Finally, Hamzawy (2003) argues that CSOs in the region have become increasingly elitist. Hamzawy (2003) noted the limited societal reach of CSOs, which are often run by a single individual. In addition, in Egypt, as most of the Middle East, politicians use CSOs to promote their personal interest for greater popularity to run for, or maintain public seat (Hamzawy, 2003).

In sum, this scholarship in preceding review illustrates importance and limitations of civil society in relation to civic engagement. The literature addressed how civil society relates to civic engagement. Furthermore, the review helps situate informal social networks, the focus of this study, within one form of civil society discussed in the literature (i.e. casual informal groups). While this form of civil society, according to Yom (2005), is the richest source of civic vitality in the Arab world as it is more communally oriented than other CSOs, it is the least recognized form of civil society. In addition, Yom (2005) asserts that despite the ability of this form of civil society in penetrating to marginalized communities and drawing a stronger following among most marginalized groups with less control from the authoritarian regime, research on this form of civil society remain limited.

Furthermore, scholars of this body situate their studies based on a contemporary conception of civil society that is mainly embedded in relatively secular traditions in the West. Such western conceptions of civil society limit participation to formal civil society

and largely miss other forms of informal avenues of participation and neglect different strategies of co-optation used by authoritarian regimes in the region which is key to this study. In addition, the blurred boundary between civil society and the state within the authoritarian context is another reason to consider the importance of informal avenues of participation.

While Coleman (1988), Putnam (1993) and Fukuyama (2002) postulate in the previous body of literature the need for civil society in order to generate social capital, the preceding review of the current body of literature discussed the importance of civil society in generating social capital and in providing networks that facilitate learning, which inform my research. However, this scholarship gives much attention to the institutional aspect of civil society and unduly neglects the aspect of human agency, especially on how less-advantaged women learn and develop their capacity in order to participate equally in such established authoritarian context in the Middle East. In addition to how learning happens, there is need to clarify what learning approach is useful for less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt. While learning within informal social networks is a central component of this study, the third body examines how young women utilize the pedagogic role of informal social networks—in a form of informal learning to acquire and utilize civic knowledge to participate in civic activities. In the next two bodies of literature, I examine the role of informal learning and civic knowledge. Then, in the last body, I examine how literature addresses informal participation in the Middle East.

Informal Learning and Civic Knowledge

The preceding review highlights the key role of civil society to manifest the interests and will of citizens and to generate social capital that facilitates learning through knowledge transfer between members of informal social networks. While scholars of this body extensively discussed how social capital facilitates sharing knowledge between members of a network, they neither addressed how this knowledge is created nor the pedagogical approach through which members of social networks acquire knowledge. The following section examines relevant literature in order to situate the learning process of informal social networks in the realm of informal learning.

The concept of informal learning can be intertwined with several other understandings of leaning. For example, theorists have used different terms such as incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001), spontaneous learning (Williams, 2007), experiential learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), conversational learning (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002), tacit learning (Polanyi, 1967), situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and action learning (Foly, 1999) to refer to informal learning. While these and other scholars address the concept of informal learning across different contexts and disciplines, they tend to agree that it can be defined as “any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies” (Livingstone, 1999, p. 51).

While participation in public life requires knowledge and skills, Haha (2010) asserts that, in addition to schools there are several other agents of socialization that

contribute to transmitting civic knowledge, such as family, media, social networks, and civil society organizations. These agents of socialization thus affect individuals and the community at large (Haha, 2010). Learning from experience and through knowledge transfer between individuals, according to Schugurensky and Myers (2003), is a common process for socialization as lifelong learning. But the processes through which individuals acquire their civic knowledge are still in need for further study (Schugurensky & Myers, 2003). In this spirit, Fischman and Haas (2012) utilize embodied cognition, metaphors and prototypes to understand citizenship education beyond idealized education. Fischman and Haas assert the relationship between education and citizenship where a more educated subject makes a better democratic citizen where "no one is born with the skills and dispositions of citizenship" (p. 176). Fischman and Haas propose metaphors to learn about citizenship and argue that metaphors are socially constructed and "metaphorical thinking enables us to understand abstract concepts in terms of everyday physical experiences" (p. 176). For example, Fischman and Haas discuss three metaphors to understand the related concept of nation: the nation as land, nation as an individual person, and the nation as a family and argue that embodied cognition is based on a realistic understanding of how people construct their subjectivities and the lived experiences of both individuals and groups.

Although Fischman and Haas frame their argument in a context of formal education in school, which is not the focus of this study, the concept of embedded cognitive metaphor provides understanding of how young people learn from their lived experience. This may help understand how less-advantaged young women within

informal social networks offered may indirectly learn about constructed civics knowledge in a group through their deconstruction and reconstruction of abstracts about public life by using metaphors from their everyday lives and experiences. Furthermore, it helps to relate how informal learning relates to civic engagement. While socialization as a process of acquisition and transformation of civic knowledge and skills may take place in different learning settings including formal education, non-formal education, and informal learning, this section focuses only on informal learning.

Informal learning

Informal learning is a distinct process than formal and non-formal education. In informal learning, Scribner and Cole (1973) assert, there is no activity that is deliberately set aside specifically to educate members of a social gathering, rather it is based on their ability to interact within social gatherings to acquire basic skills, values, and attitudes on their own. Livingstone (1999) defines informal learning as "any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies" (p. 51). Informal learning is often used interchangeably with the non-formal education. Non-formal education, however, is not a synonym of informal learning. Non-formal education refers to educational activities that also take place outside school but usually in an organized intended manner (Rogers, 2004). It is organized short-term and voluntary educational activities on topics related to life skills and livelihood activities (Rogers, 2004). Informal learning may include internal types that distinguish it from formal and non-formal education such as self-directed learning, incidental learning, and

socialization (Schugurensky, 2000). The latter type, socialization, usually referred to as tacit learning. Informal learning, however, can also be intentional but not formally structured like informal learning within networking, coaching, and self-directed learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

The above distention between informal learning and non-formal education brings important perspective to help situate learning of informal social networks and the one of the *Neqdar Nesharek* program in their proper fields. While USAID identifies the educational approach of the *Neqdar Nesharek* program as non-formal education based on the intentionality and organized routine discussed above by Rogers (2004) and Scribner and Cole (1973), this may not be the case when USAID phase out the program. USAID rational of *Neqdar Nesharek* program is that informal social network, as a byproduct, will sustain its function to provide civic knowledge in a form of informal learning to less-advantaged young women without the role being played by the program. The phasing out of USAID, who ensures the intentionality and organization factors of non-formal education per se, will turn the educational approach of the network to informal learning based on the above definition by Scribner and Cole (1973).

Similar to the embodied cognition concept by Fischman and Haas (2012), consciousness of learning is another distinguishing factor between non-formal education and informal learning. Contrary to the non-formal education, learning experiences within informal learning, Schugurensky and Myers (2003) argue, are often “unconscious, and the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired through them are tacit” (p. 326). Despite the above dilemma, this study situates civic learning through informal social networks

created as a byproduct of development programs such as *Neqdar Nesharak* in the realm of informal learning.

The concept of informal learning intertwined with several other leaning concepts as theorized by scholars in related learning theories. In the discourse of informal learning, theorists have been using different names to refer to the informal learning: incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001), spontaneous learning (Williams, 2007), experiential learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), conversational learning (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002), tacit learning (Polanyi, 1967), situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and action learning (Foly, 1999). While young rural women learn through informal learning within informal social networks, learning may take one form or a combination of different forms of the preceding pedagogical approaches. In order to situate the informal learning of *Neqdar Nesharak* within these different pedagogical theories, the following section limits the review of literature to three of these learning theories: conversational learning by Kolb 1984, experiential learning by Dewey (1938) and transformative learning by Mezirow (1990). These three learning theories are interwoven together. Conversation, according to Kolb (1984), facilitates sharing experience amongst young people where they learn from their each other experience; in his experiential learning theory, albite focuses on pupils in school, Dewey (1938) asserts that experience is one route of education. Similarly, Mezirow (1997) argues conversation facilitates transformative learning process where learning transforms perspectives, meaning, and frames of reference to make them more reflective and changeable between young people.

Conversational Learning

A great deal of learning occurs through social interactions and conversation. Kolb (2014) argues that conversation plays key role in informal learning. Although it may appear random, Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002) and Thomas (1994) argue that casual conversation in everyday lives is an essential contribution to learning, especially for children and young people. Despite its importance and effectiveness because of its dynamic and reciprocal qualities, conversational learning has received very little analytical or research attention, and most of the available studies on conversational learning are concerned with parent-child conversation (Thomas, 1994).

Conversational learning is a form of experiential learning and involves "a process of interpreting and understanding human experience" (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002, p. 2). Conversation is not just talking, but includes asking the right question in the right time; it has several forms, including face-to-face conversation, telephone conversation, and conversation among written texts or through social media (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002). Grounded in the theory of experiential learning, conversational learning builds on Freire's (1970) proposal of problem-posing, education-based dialogue to promote deep learning as a powerful and transformative process. It also utilizes the concept of the interdependency and reciprocity of social capital by Coleman (1988), Fukuyama (2002) and Putnam (1993), particularly the ability of people to work together for common purpose (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002). Through conversations, learners construct meaning and transform experiences into knowledge. Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002) conceptualize the conversational learning process as learners moving through the cycle of

experience, reflecting, abstracting, and acting. Receptive space is important for a dialectic process within which conversational learning occurs. This space, Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002) note, should be an open space that allow speaking and listening to all members in order to create conversation. Such a space within informal social networks (e.g. *Neqdar Nesharak* program) is extremely important for young women who lack safe spaces to participate equally in public life. However, while conversation exists in the three types of education (formal, non-formal, and informal), scholars of this section discuss conversational learning only within formal and non-formal education settings.

Experiential Learning

The theory of experiential learning is informed by the contributions of experiential learning models of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Kurt Lewin (Kolb, 1984). The process of learning from experience was first addressed when Dewey (1938) introduced the theory of experiential learning in the beginning of the last millennium. Dewey introduced the concept of experience in education as a way of learning by doing to explain inductive interactive learning processes that are not limited to the teacher-pupil relationship in a classroom, where the latter is heavily dependent on the former as the only source of knowledge (in a model similar to the banking concept later delineated by Freire (1970). Rather, the main purpose of learning through experience, according to Dewey (1938) is to “prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life, by means of acquisition of the organized bodies of information and prepared forms of skills” (p. 3). This rational idealist epistemology is what, first, identifies experiential learning and, second, distinguishes it from other behavioral theories of learning (Kolb,

1984). Unlike transformative learning theory by Mezirow (1997) that is cognitively oriented, experiential learning is a holistic, integrative approach that combines experience, cognition, perception, and behavior (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning, therefore, is a process where "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 2014, p. 38).

While experience is the key factor in the theory of experiential learning, experience alone is insufficient to count as experiential learning. Joplin (1981) asserts that two factors are crucial in order to turn experience into experiential learning. The first is reflection, where learners are able to reflect on their experience, engendering the transformation of experience that generates knowledge, as identified by Kolb (2014). The second is the individual's relationship to the topic: experiential learning is based on the assumption that knowing must begin with such a relationship. In addition, the process of experiential learning is dependent on experiential stimulus by a teacher (in the case of formal education) or by a facilitator (in the case of non-formal education). In the latter, the quality of that stimulus varies greatly depending upon the selected pedagogical approach. Intentionality is a factor that may determines the suitability of experiential learning as a form of informal learning within informal social networks and distinguishes the use of experiential learning between formal education and informal learning (Joplin, 1981). Bell (1993) postulates the interpretation of an experience as another condition for an experience to be considered as experiential learning, and asserted that experience exists through interpretation. In addition, Bell (1993) notes that individuals' interpretations of lived experiences are often contextual and produced through the

meanings given to them. In addition, experiential learning intertwines with conversational learning where the latter is important for the function of the former as Thomas (1994) notes, sharing past experiences through conversation and looking forward to future ones helps individuals gain familiarity with their context and manifests its pedagogical power.

Kolb (2014) notes several characteristics that distinguish experiential learning from other ways of learning. These characteristics include learning as a continuous process grounded in experiences, and learning as a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Although the focus of the theory of experiential learning by Dewey (1938) is on the pupil and classroom, it has potential to understand the informal learning within the informal social networks of *Neqdar Nesharak* program in rural Egypt as well. The characteristics noted by Kolb (2014) show how conceiving of informal learning as a form of experiential learning may help engender understanding about how young women in *Neqdar Nesharak* program can transform their everyday experiences through interpretation and reflection of their experience to help generate civic knowledge through their participation in a personal network.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is identified as a process in which learning transforms perspectives, meaning, and frames of reference to make them more reflective and changeable (Mezirow, 1997). Frame of reference, according to Mezirow (1997), includes fixed interpersonal relationships, political orientations, cultural bias, and attitudes. There are four ways to learn through transformative learning, according to Mezirow (1997). One way is though elaboration on an existing point of view. A second way is to establish

a new point of view that may contradict or challenge the existing one. A third way of learning is to transform or share a point of view. When individuals in a group critically reflect on their previous experience or misconceptions, this may result in a change in point of view and increased tolerance or acceptance of members of that group (Mezirow, 1997). The fourth way of learning is when individuals make changes in the way they learn, as they become aware and critically reflective of their generalized bias in terms of their perspective on points of view other than their own. The process of the fourth way of learning, however, may not be applicable, as individuals do not make transformative changes in the way they learn insofar as they are comfortable with their interpretations.

Reflection is important in the discourse of transformative learning, where specialized use of dialogue leads to common understanding in the group (Mezirow, 2000). In addition, Mezirow (2000) asserted that effective participation in transformative learning requires emotional maturity. Furthermore, ideal conditions for effective transformative learning should involve active listening, absence of domination, reciprocity, and cooperation in the group. In this regard, Johnson and Johnson (2013) noted that members of a group have to adopt a set of civic values in order to build a learning community. These values include shared goals, common values that promote appropriate behavior, and commitment to the common good. Johnson and Johnson (2013) also postulate that competition and individualism should not have a part in transformative cooperative learning. While these values are undeniably important for the transformative learning process, they may add a limitation for marginalized young women targeted in *Neqdar Nesharak* program. These values require additional commitments that rural

young women may not be able to fulfil given the limited accessibility as noted earlier by Brady (2005) in laying the problematic of this study and because of parents/husbands control on young women as discussed above in the context of this study.

The theory of transformative learning may fit well with efforts to capitalize on the agency of marginalized, underrepresented young women in rural Egypt to promote their full, active citizenship. Transformative learning may represent a route to facilitate the way young women within informal social networks think as autonomous agents. By autonomy, Mezirow (1997) refers to the "understanding, skills, and disposition necessary to become critically reflective of one's own assumptions and to engage effectively in discourse to validate one's beliefs through the experiences of others who share universal values" (p. 9).

However, while transformative learning theory was inspired by the women's liberation movement in the United States in the 1970s, it may not align with the Egyptian context for two reasons. First, transformative learning is too cognitively oriented. Given the low quality of education of marginalized young women of *Neqdar Nesharak* program in rural Egypt, they may lack the level of consciousness and education required during the reflection process of transformative learning. In this context, the idea of using metaphors to learn about sophisticated citizenship abstracts in the concept of embodied cognition by Fischman and Haas (2012) may be useful to overcome this concern where metaphors as such are socially constructed in everyday physical experiences. Second, the political and social movement may have implicitly played a notable role in the application of transformative learning by Mezirow (1997), which may not be the case in

the established authoritarian context in Egypt. Given the nature of rural Egypt, in which oppression exists, there can be little motivation for basic humanization and freedom as argued by Freire (1970, 1998). Accordingly, transformative learning, as theorized by Mezirow (1997), may need to accompany by the political/social will for liberation and freedom, and that should be examined in contemporary rural Egypt.

Finally, the preceding review highlights the interwoven nature of conversation with experiential and transformative learning and its important role in facilitating learning. Scholars, however, discussed the three leaning approaches in school setting which confuse the nature of informal learning that is not excluded to classroom especially where this study focus is on women's informal learning from social interaction within informal social networks. In addition, Kolb (2014) and Mezirow (1997) put emphasis on discussing the functionality of the concepts and give less attention to the agency of learners to construct their knowledge and the meaning of this knowledge. Furthermore, Kolb (2014), Mezirow (1997) and Thomas (1994) analysis of the learning approaches: conversational, experiential, and transformative is guided by an assumption situated in the theory of education and human development that there is linear relationship between learning through these approaches and personal development. This assumption as such neglects the social aspect of the learning process. In an ethnography on cultural meaning of education in Brazil, however, Bartlett (2007) challenges this linear relationship between education and human development and suggest a need to reconsider key theories and dominant discourses about literacy and economic development. Bartlett (2007) argued that the economic opportunities that education opened for educated people are a

"product of their development as 'educated' people, which contributed to their efforts to extend and maintain social networks" (p. 1614). This study, albeit within formal education context, underpins the relationship between education and sociability as it highlights the social meaning of education.

Bartlett's (2007) suggestion may be relevant to the understanding of the pedagogical approach of *Neqdar Nesharek* program and its rational where *Neqdar Nesharek* as an entrepreneurship-training program focuses on the sociability aspect to increase the visibility of rural young women in their society in a way to increase their employability. Yet the focus of the scholarship of this body of literature is mainly on formal setting and less about learning within informal context. In addition, the preceding review highlights the way scholars addressed learners in a generic way assuming that what works for male young people will work for female young people with less attention to learning of less-advantaged young women particularly in restrictive context similar to the *Neqdar Nesharek* program. Similarly, scholars of the previous body about civil society situate their studies based on a contemporary conception of civil society in western traditions, which may be considered secular compared to the MENA region, where western conceptions of civil society limit participation to formal civil society and largely miss other forms of informal avenues of participation. The following body, therefore, examine informal participation in the Middle East where informal avenues bring together young women to reflect and learn from their experiences through dialectic conversation as a form of participation.

Informal Participation in the Middle East

The preceding review highlights the key role of civil society not only to manifest interests and will of citizens, but also to generate social capital and provide the networks of civic learning and civic engagement. Similarly, this discussion highlights limitations of civil society in the Middle East within a cultural and authoritarian political context. Less attention has been given to informal and casual social groups as a rich source of civic vitality in the Arab world, as argued by Yom (2005), especially for marginalized groups (e.g. rural young women of *Neqdar Nesharek* program). The following section examines how literature addresses informal civic engagement in the Middle East. By informal civic engagement, I mean people's involvement in avenues of participation other than those offered by the state and formal civil society.

Civic engagement, though it is a broad term encompassing a wide range of activities as identified earlier, involves some sort of power (Gallagher, 2008). Engaging in public life in authoritarian context of Egypt based on regime hegemony is problematic for marginalized people especially young women in rural communities. Drawing on Foucault's (1980, 1983) conceptions of power, resistance and subjectivity is useful in understanding how individuals under authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, who are struggling to participate in their public life but lacking the appropriate channels, co-operate and formulate strategies and alternatives for participation of their own (Singerman, 1995; Wedeen, 2008; Bayat, 2010; Pandya, 2010; Deeb, 2011).

While freedom is vital in understanding power struggles of marginalized people, Foucault (1982) notes that power is exercised over free subjects who are capable of

action with different possibilities to resist and react (Merlingen, 2003). In order to understand civic engagement as a form of power, I draw on Lindroth's (2011), assertion that power is productive and not a restrictive force of the powerful (e.g. elite minority to enforce their will on the powerless such as marginalized rural women). In this sense, Foucault (1980) asserts the importance of understanding the context of network interactions in which individuals exercise their power and "never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as commodity…power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization" (p. 98). Furthermore, civic engagement can be seen as the power of marginalized people to resist their socially constructed reality and according to Foucault (1998) resistance is the other side of power "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95). Resistance comes with the process of subjectification (Foucault, 1983). Subjectivity is a precondition of agency where "one cannot have the capacity to act without having the ability or capacity to deliberate, that is, without being a thinking subjectivity" (Allen, 2002, p. 135). According to Foucault's conception, civic engagement as a way of participating in public life, especially in civic activities related to decision-making (e.g. voting) is a form of power available to everyone including less-advantaged young women. This power, however, "exists only when it is put into action" (Foucault, 1983, p. 219). The right to vote, as an example of a civic engagement activity albite it is not the focus of this study, is a political right normalized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and in most state constitutions that becomes a power only when exercised. Drawing on the preceding argument, therefore, less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt (e.g. *Neqdar Nesharek* program) are labeled powerless if they do not socially interact with others in the public.

In addition, Arendt (1970a) associates power with the ability of people to come together and she asserts “power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert” (as cited in Lukes, 2005, p. 32). With this definition, Arendt (1970b) situates power in the gathering of young women in a social network rather than their participation in civic activities as Foucault argues and asserted that power “derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that may follow” (Lukes, 2005, p. 32)

Literature on informal civic engagement in MENA region reinforces the importance of looking at informal avenues of participation as a space of political possibility and as a means to subvert the co-opted institutional forms of participation. The following review, therefore, considers four examples of informal participation from the Middle East region to guide this review here.

Women’s Shiite Ma’atm

The first example explores the function of women’s Shiite *ma’atm* in Bahrain, discussed by Pandya (2010, 2012). Shiite “*ma'atm*—an Arabic term [that] means funeral house” (Pandya, 2010, p. 37) also known as *Hussainia* in Persian—is a congregational space for Muslim Shiite women to hold commemoration ceremonies. Though it may look like a mosque, a *ma’atm* is different from a mosque because of its functions. Pandya (2010) asserts that the women’s *ma’atm* evolved from being a communal space to grieve the martyrdom of religious figures to a venue for communal support. The women’s *ma’atm* is widely used in Bahrain not only for religious rituals but also for educational, social, and political ends including political socialization (Pandya, 2010; Deeb, 2011).

Although it is accessible to both Shiite and Sunni Muslims, Pandya (2010) argues that poor Shiite women in Bahrain visit the *ma'atm* more to seek knowledge about public issues because of the lack of other decent/viable government alternatives.

The women's *ma'atm* represents an important part of women's everyday lives in Bahrain. In this context, Deeb (2011) and Pandya (2010) highlight the growing role of the *ma'atm* in non-formal education and civic engagement for women. Women's engagement varies from attending candidates' election campaigns that normally take place in the *ma'atm*, to leading classes on literacy, health awareness, or advocacy for policy issues. Recently, women have begun to utilize the *ma'atm* as an informal public space, to express their dissent regarding social and political inequality in Bahrain where essential public services are lacked (Pandya, 2012). Participation thus represents a form of power that advances women's position, as conceptualized above by Foucault (1983). In this regard, Bayat (2010) argues that in most of the Middle East when a formal avenue of civic engagement does not exist or is not accessible, individuals tend to create or utilize other avenues such as the women's *ma'atm* to express their views and participate in the civic life.

Despite the relevance of women's *ma'atm* to the focus of this study, it may bring some concerns when apply it to examine participation of marginalized rural young women in Egypt. While women in Bahrain utilized the women's *ma'atm* as an already existed physical space, there is no such physical space available for young women in rural Egypt. In addition, such physical space with religious function may face the same restriction of civil society in Egypt where the authoritarian regime strictly controls

religious institutions because of its attempts to limit the room for radical Islamist (Hopkins & Ibrahim, 2001).

Life as Politics

Bayat (2010) illustrates another example of how ordinary individuals in the Middle East develop alternative informal avenues for political participation. Bayat (2010) argues that urban public spaces (e.g. public parks, squares, back alleys and main streets) in neoliberal cities like Cairo and Tehran utilized as a "key theater for social and political contention" by people who are deprived from other ordinary options in such authoritarian contexts (p. 11). Individuals, as fragmented social groups, utilize street and other open spaces to unite and construct common identities in order to resist the authorities. In some cases, these fragmented social groups per se can force legal or policy changes or even to force change in the authoritarian regimes similar to what so called the "Arab Uprisings" in Tunisia and Egypt where young women, especially in Egypt, were a major player (LaGraffe, 2012).

The importance of such spontaneous change, Bayat (2010) argues, not only lies in the creation and the use of public space as an avenue for participation but also in the realization of the unconventional form of agency and activism emerging in the region. Public spaces have also implication on advancing women's rights under Muslim authoritarian regimes. In this vein, Bayat (2010) asserts that women can, consciously or unconsciously, resist and negotiate gender inequality and make oneself heard through the utilization of public domain in ordinary everyday practices such as schooling, working, jogging, singing, or playing sports.

Bayat's example of *Life as Politics* is deeply important to this study as well as to the *Neqdar Nesharek* program as the focus of the latter is to facilitate build women agency in rural Egypt. Bayat's argument about the way women can consciously or unconsciously resist and negotiate the constructed inequality and make their voice heard may inform this study where it shows the viability of informal participation and its positive consequence on women socially in Muslim authoritarian context. However, the ad hoc and short-term nature of women's participation in Bayat's (2010) argument may not fully align with the focus of this study on young women's everyday participation in public life.

Qat chew gatherings in Yemen

Similarly, Wedeen (2008) introduces *qat* chew gatherings in Yemen as another example of informal, yet public, participation for women. *Qat*, as noted by Wedeen, is a "leafy stimulant drug with similarities in effect to caffeine" (p. 104) that Yeminis often chew in public in the context of structured afternoon conversations, where women have female-only sessions. Although it is legal to chew in Yemen, *qat* is prohibited and is an illegal drug in the rest of the Middle East (Wedeen, 2008). In the authoritarian context of Yemen, people create their own spaces to participate in public affairs through their ordinary daily lives. In this spirit, Wedeen notes, *qat* chews serve as informal conversational gatherings for individuals to share their experiences and to deliberate an array of public issues such as literacy, politics, policy issues, and social problems. Wedeen makes an analogy between *qat* chews and coffee houses and focus groups in the U.S., in which information about local and national affairs gets exchanged. According to

Wedeen, therefore, deliberation about public issues within *qat* chews represents a form of learning, civic engagement and a form of democracy. The definition of democracy used by Western scholars as contested elections, Wedeen argues, gives less attention to other important forms of non-formal spaces for democratic expression, especially those that may take place in authoritarian context, such as the *qat* chews, and asserts that "the deliberation so evident in these meetings represents an important aspect of democratic practice" (p. 104).

Finally, Wedeen (2008) asserts that experience sharing and deliberation, as key element of the informal conversational gatherings for individuals during *qat* chews, offers a mechanism for experiential learning that may be an effective guise for civic education. While individuals during *qat* chews engage with a certain experience on public affairs, they reflect on what happened in their society and expand the discussion to reflect on how it happened and why. As such, according to Dewey (1938), this may provide an alternative opportunity for less-advantaged young women who are deprived of education where "ordinary experience is one route for education" (p. 114). Wedeen (2008) notes that despite the important role of these events, barriers including language, culture, and lack of interest keep such events beyond the grasp of the research of most Western scholars and publications. However, despite the learning process of the *qat* chews gatherings as such highlights the relevance to this study especially in examining informal learning within informal social networks, it entails some limitations. First, the motive for these gatherings is to chew *qat* which may not be relevant to young women in rural Egypt where *qat* is illegal drug and may not be socially accepted. Second, given the low

economic status of less-advantaged rural young women in Egypt and the relatively high price of *qat*—"$10 per bunch" (Weir, 2001, p. 281), young women may not afford such additional cost and will not be able to participate.

Avenues of Participation in Cairo

The last example of informal participation is the operational role of informal networks as a useful survival mechanism for marginalized people in authoritarian context of Egypt by Singerman (1995). Singerman demonstrates how poor women and men in slum quarters of Cairo are deeply involved in weaving collective social networks to advance their economic and political interests within the politics of everyday life. These informal networks evolved to utilize social capital generated by members to facilitate access or provide unmet services and resources as an alternative to the unavailable resources from the state. The social capital generated through the involvement of poor women and men in these networks creates reciprocal mechanisms where participants either receive or deliver an array of community services. These services include offering employment through family and the informal economy, access to credit through saving and rotating credit associations, voluntary health and literacy services, or access to local bureaucrats who may facilitate another range of services (Singerman, 1995). The effectiveness of this form of informal civil society, compared to the formal civil society that is co-opted by the authoritarian regime, lies in its very informality and therefore its avoidance of "direct supervision and regulations of the laws regulating formal associations in Egypt" (Singerman, 2006, p. 17).

Informal avenues of participation as a concept have utility in the Egyptian context because of their potential to partially compensate marginalized citizens for their limited influence in such an authoritarian state. Participation is not limited only within the informal mechanism per se, but Singerman (1995) argues that these mechanisms create public spaces that reach out to the conventional public arena, and indirectly "connect individuals and communities to state bureaucracies, public institutions, and formal political institutions" (p. 17). The intersection between informal avenues and state institutions as such represents, according to Foucault (1980), a form of "manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body" (p. 93). The concept of informal avenues of participation shows the importance of the various, context-dependent ways that societies manifest their political activities, and it highlights the need for comparativists to be mindful of other creative mechanisms people use to advance their political ends outside of traditional formal civil society.

In conclusion, the preceding review reinforces the importance of informal participation as a space of political possibility in the Middle East region especially in authoritarian context like Egypt where institutional forms of participation are co-opted as argued in chapter one by Albrecht (2013). The review of the four examples by Singerman (1995), Wedeen (2008), Bayat (2010) and Padania (2012), suggests the suitability of these informal avenues of participation not only as a means to subvert the co-opted institutional forms of participation but also to serve as a "free schools of democracy" as asserted by Tocqueville (1838) where individuals can exercise their rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, these examples reveal the significance of informal avenues

of participation to my study that attempts to study informal social networks in relation to civic learning and civic participation of young women in rural Egypt who are mainly deprived from education, have less access to educational opportunities, and less engaged in public life.

Scholarship of the preceding body highlights the significance of such informal gatherings in fostering women's agency as they gain the ability and capacity to deliberate their rights and responsibilities as argued by Allen (2002). Significantly, Arendt (1970b) highlights the importance of informal social networks to spring up the power of marginalized rural women as they come together where legitimacy of power of rural young women per se stems from their ability to come together. This associates with the rational of *Neqdar Nesharek* program in providing a safe space to bring young women together where they can meet and find the support they need to seek employment.

Unlike the preceding bodies of this review, scholarship in the last body illustrates that other meaningful forms of civic engagement are happening outside of the state and formal civil society by individuals in the Middle East. Despite the importance of these informal mechanisms, which meet the above definitions of civil society and serve as a buffer between the state and society, researchers privilege formal institutions, leaving such mechanisms almost out of the picture.

The four examples of unconventional avenues of participation, albeit not specifically for women in Egypt, show how the involvement of women under authoritarian regimes in ordinary daily practices of life can advance their position and help circumvent their underrepresentation. They point to thinking about the informal

learning as a byproduct that takes place in everyday lives of young women and provides knowledge and skills. This body is the most relevant for further research on my topic for several reasons: Scholars of this body highlights the importance of unconventional agency of marginalized group especially women to utilize informal avenues to learn, advance their roles under Muslim authoritarian regimes, exercise their power, negotiate gender inequality and make their voice heard as well as the potential role of these avenues in political socialization.

However, other questions remain unanswered, and more studies are needed in order to understand how young women conceptualize their experience within informal social networks and how this experience influences their civic engagement. Particularly, this studies reveals how the learning happens within networks and how young women in rural Egypt appropriate these benefits to advance their role and participate in public life in their societies.

Gaps in literature and further research

Scholarship of the four bodies of literature of this chapter provides an essential foundation for understanding the role of social capital to facilitate learning in social gathering and for understanding the relationships between informal learning and its related social network, and civic engagement especially of women. This scholarship, however, is inconclusive and the preceding review suggests further research to gain a contextualized understanding of how informal social networks might complement other formal institutions of civic engagement, either by formal civil society or by the state. From the one hand, Coleman (1988), Putnam (1993) and Fukuyama (2002) postulate in

the first body of literature on social capital and civic engagement the necessity for civil society in order to generate social capital that facilitate transfer knowledge and skills required for participation. On the other hand, Singerman (2006), Wedeen (2008), Bayat (2010) and Padania (2012), highlight the role of informal avenues (e.g. women's *ma'tam*, *qat* chew) to provide learning and political socialization through conversation, deliberation, and experience sharing between members of these avenues.

In discussing the importance of social interactions among individuals in personal social networks in order to generate social capital that is to achieve certain ends, Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993) demonstrate a linear relationship between an affiliation with networks and the generation of social capital. Coleman and Putnam assume, however, that individuals who are located in these networks are similar and have equal opportunities to benefit and to share their opinion during social interactions. Young women in rural Egypt, however, may have less opportunity to benefit from this kind of social capital as compared to men or even older women especially when participating in mixed-age and mixed-sex networks. In this regard, there is need to explore ways in which young women influence and utilize the benefits of social capital within and beyond their social networks. An emerging question remains: how do young women conceptualize their social capital generated within social networks, and how does it foster or restrict their civic engagement?

Furthermore, scholarship highlights the need for further studies to understand the various ways that women in local societies manifest their civic activities based on their contexts. In this spirit, Abu-Lughod (1998, 2013) notes that most published studies about

women's civic engagement in rural Egypt are written in the West and are mainly a combination of stereotypes and generalizations about how Arab women are oppressed and subjugated. Abu-Lughod (2013) notes the lack of field research, as researchers are unable to gain access to Egyptian households and mirror their understanding based on their Western views of participation. Therefore, Abu-Lughod (2010) underpins the need for ethnography to better understand the dynamic of everyday social lives of women in rural Egypt.

Similarly, despite the importance of informal and casual social groups as the richest source of social capital and civic engagement in the Middle East, Yom (2005) underscores the scarcity of literature on this form of civil society in the region. Furthermore, as noted by Lowndes (2004), the few studies that have examined women's social capital in social informality and civic engagement have been conducted in the West and mainly cover one form of civic engagement—voting. In addition, while scholarship provides empirical justifications to claim significant relationship between network affiliations and civic engagement, it is methodologically impossible to generalize this result to all women in the Middle East, especially to young women in rural Egypt. Because reality is socially constructed, meaning should be created through an interactive process where these meanings are formed on a wider social level (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). There is a need, therefore, for a different methodology for research that allows young women to construct their own knowledge and meaning of participation. This study per se aims to show how different versions of these socially constructed

realities of the world are produced in discourse and in their daily lives and practices of rural young women in Egypt.

Another gap, as Wedeen (2008) identifies, is the limited research on the pedagogical role of informal social networks. Deliberation within informal social networks may help young women reflect on their experience and learn about civic education in a form of experiential learning. Despite the interdisciplinary approach of the field of comparative education, there is little exploration of topics relating to experiential learning within informal networks, especially for rural women.

The preceding review of relevant literature along with the research problem and conceptual framework provide an essential foundation for understanding the relationship between informal social networks and civic engagement and point to possible research directions.

Summary

The preceding review addressed relevant literature to examine how scholarship conceptualizes informal social networks and the civic engagement of young women in rural Egypt. Different perspectives included social capital, civil society, informal learning, and informal participation in the Middle East region were examined. The review shows the interdisciplinary nature of the topic of women's civic engagement. While these views underscore the important institutional dimension of social gatherings, they leave out other important issues of the relationship between informal social networks and civic engagement—namely the human agency of marginalized young women, which is significant in the field of comparative education.

Despite the interdisciplinary nature of the field of comparative education and the multiplicity of its approaches to research in a wide array of topics in international development, there is little research on issues relating to social networks and civic engagement especially in authoritarian settings. The few attempts to understand this phenomenon have mainly studied it with descriptive experimental perspective in Western context and limited to voting. As each individual is unique, young women should construct their own knowledge and meaning of their experience. A qualitative research to understand the dynamics of the active social life of young women in networks in relation to their civic engagement may help create theoretical understanding of the pedagogical role of informal social networks as they engender a form of informal learning. Such a study may also provide further insight into how learning in the ordinary daily experience of less-advantaged young women help to understand the nature of their engagement in various civic activities. This study is relevant and well situated within the field of comparative education because it broadens scholarship on this phenomenon. The following chapter, the methodology, addresses how research questions will be applied methodologically, and set forth a plan for data collection, analysis, and validation, as well consider potential limitations for the research.

Chapter Three: Methodology and methods

Introduction

The theoretical framework that I employ is largely informed by Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning. For this reason, I adopt their methodology to examine the pedagogical role of social networks in developing the civic participation of young women in rural Egypt. The two introductory chapters highlighted the need for a different methodological approach for understanding the acts of young women's everyday lives as forms of participation and this need serves to guide my choice of methodology and methods, which is the focus of this chapter. Stemming from the primary objective of this study, which is to better understand the relationship between informal social networks and women's civic engagement, this chapter introduces the methodological considerations for this research.

The choice of data collection and data analysis methods and procedures for this qualitative study was governed by a constructivist paradigm assumption. Based upon the notion that reality is best understood by examining social interactions among individuals, this qualitative study draws on ethnographic and phenomenological methods to examine how social interactions within the informal social networks formed as a byproduct of the *Neqdar Nesharek* program may involve a form of informal learning that promotes the civic and political participation of young rural women in Fayoum. Along with the literature review, the theoretical framework and design of this study address the following research questions:

1. How do young women in Fayoum understand the social and political issues that impact their lives and identities within their communities?
2. How young women understand their experiences of their self-created women groups in relation to their civic learning?
3. How are these young women drawing upon and applying what they learned in these informal groups?
4. How do the experiences of these women then compare with mainstream accounts of civic participation in Egypt?

The rest of this chapter discusses the study's design and methodological considerations, as well as the selection of the research sites, sampling and recruitment of participants, research methods, data collection, data analysis, and validity issues.

Study design and methodological consideration

The broad purpose of this study is to examine women's public participation; within that, the focus of this dissertation is to understand how less-advantaged rural young women in Egypt conceptualize their experiences of informal social networks as spaces for developing their civic engagement. This study delves into social interactions within networks to assess how these women acquire knowledge and skills through informal learning in order to advance their civic engagement. Studying rural women in this way was important for two main reasons: 1) There is a lack of literature on the relationship between social interaction and civic engagement and, 2) The majority of existing literature on adult learning is not gender specific and is androcentric in nature.

In Chapter One, I addressed one of the limitations of previous research on women's participation, namely that current research neglects the importance of understanding the acts of young women in their everyday lives as forms of participation. In order to problematize the SES model and the epistemological approach employed in SYPE, this qualitative study straddled a constructivist approach. Using the result of SYPE as a point of departure, the study intended to explain how less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt with low socioeconomic status, including women with a low level or lack of education, acquire knowledge and skills to advance their civic engagement in their society, as well as to demonstrate that such civic engagement is not captured by other research.

Literature on informal and experiential learning suggests that situated learning theory is an appropriate framework for exploring learners' experiences of authentic learning where learning is based on interactions between learners and their environment (Lewin, 1947). Extending this framework to women's participation in informal networks in a rural Egyptian context and complementing it with the concept of social capital invites new and groundbreaking insights into processes and contexts of informal learning and public participation. Additionally, as I reviewed current research on rural women in Egypt, it became apparent that the research is fragmented and that no attempts have been made to investigate women's informal social networks in relation to their civic engagement. Since it has been argued that qualitative research methodology is useful particularly when there is little known about the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Bernard, 2011), I decided to adopt qualitative methods

throughout this study to examine how young women conceptualize their experience within informal networks in relation to their civic engagement.

From the perspective of constructivism, there is no single valid methodology for investigating and discovering truth, but rather a diversity of useful approaches (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, the methodology for this study overlaps with three qualitative research genres to investigate the relationship between informal social networks and women's civic engagement. While this study was predominantly phenomenological in nature as it focuses on the attitudes and lived experiences of young women, there was a clear overlap with two other genres, namely ethnography and discourse analysis. This phenomenological qualitative study, therefore, was guided by a naturalistic research paradigm where women actively constructed their own meanings and experience of networks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and where "meaning arise[s] out of social situations and is handled through interpretive processes" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 137). The phenomenological approach is conducive to understanding the informal learning and civic engagement of rural women from their perspective, rather than from the perspective of the researcher or their society at large, as highlighted by Abu-Lughod (2010). Thus, I employed phenomenological methods that helped the women to reflect on their lived experiences and also provided me with the opportunity to uncover these lived experiences.

Because it is difficult to understand a specific situation outside of the context in which it occurs, staying in Fayoum for the entire duration of my field research for this dissertation was foundational to my research. My two-month extended stay provided me

the opportunity to look at the daily realities that shape the lived experience of young women in their rural society and culture in a form that is similar to ethnography (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 137). As a temporarily familiar face to the local society, my consistent presence facilitated nonparticipant observation of the recurrent everyday activities of young women's lives in their context that otherwise may not have been possible as a male researcher.

Grounded in the naturalistic paradigm, qualitative research, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "[represents] a distillation of what we think about the world" and provides us the tools needed to examine the world from the individual's perspective (p. 15). Qualitative research, therefore, was best suited to exploring the ways young women in rural areas come to learn how to act and take part in their society. The decision to use qualitative research methods was motivated by the notion that reality is best understood by examining the social interactions that take place in the everyday lives of individuals in particular settings.

Qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews were the primary source of data collection for this study. Other methods were also used to complement the data collection sources, including nonparticipant observation, informal conversation, reflective journals, and document analysis. During the semi-structured interviews, women were asked to think retrospectively about their involvement with other participants of *Neqdar Nesharek* and how they formed and maintained networks until the time of the interview. After a network was identified, women were asked a set of open-ended and unstructured questions based on the flow of each conversation. The questions related specifically to

their experience with social networks and how those experiences are related to their civic engagement. Several techniques were used to help women elaborate on their experiences within their social networks and how those networks relate to civic engagement, including open-ended questions designed to prompt storytelling. Most of the interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, and, in a few cases, I scheduled a follow-up interview that took place in one the three villages, as I explain in detail in the following sections.

Selecting research sites

Several factors were considered in the process of selecting the geographic location for this study, the development program, and the participants. My selection of Egypt as the location of this research stems not only from my background as an Egyptian, but also from Egypt's rural nature, which is relevant to this study. In addition, the selection was also motivated by the existence of *Neqdar Nesharek*, a development program which was created by the Population Council in order to equip marginalized young women with entrepreneurial skills. By working within this development program, I gained the legitimacy needed to penetrate conservative rural societies in Fayoum. Professional connections resulting from my past work in the development field with international development agencies in Egypt, including the Population Council, facilitated the initial connection with the beneficiaries and partners of the *Neqdar Nesharek* program. Although the purpose of *Neqdar Nesharek* was to provide a form of non-formal education (i.e. entrepreneurial skills) and the focus of my study is on informal learning, *Neqdar Nesharek* was a feasible and legitimate way to reach out to young women in a conservative rural society in order to learn about their lived experience of

informal social networks. Former participants of *Neqdar Nesharek* were the perfect match with my research purposes, as *Neqdar Nesharek*'s final report indicated that women utilized informal social networks that they had established as a byproduct of the program to develop their public engagement. In Egypt, *Neqdar Nesharek* was implemented in three rural governorates. I chose three villages out of the ten villages where *Neqdar Nesharek* was implemented in Fayoum governorate: Hope Village, Dream Village, and Bright Village (these village names are pseudonyms for the actual three villages in Fayoum).

I chose to conduct my research with young women who had attended the *Neqdar Nesharek* program in the Fayoum governorate. Three major criteria were applied for the identification of the location for this study:

1. Fayoum is one of three governorates where the *Neqdar Nesharek* program was implemented.
2. The percentage of illiterate young women who had participated in the programs in this location is above the national mean.
3. It is one of the poorest governorates in Egypt and the poorest of the three governorates involved in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program.

In sum, the rational for selecting the rural Fayoum governorate was because it is one of the most impoverished governorates in Egypt with a high percentage of marginalized young women with little access to economic opportunities. Fayoum is located about 100 miles southwest of Cairo, with a total population of 2,111,589 as of January 2014 (State Information Service, 2017). Among females in Fayoum, 36.8% are illiterate (mainly in

rural villages of Fayoum) and 38.7% are between the ages of 15 and 25 (General Authority for Adult Education, 2016).

In addition to the three villages that hosted *Neqdar Nesharek* in Fayoum, I was originally planning to select another village that was not targeted by the program to interview some non-*Neqdar Nesharek* young women. During my field research preparation with the project team and officials of the Population Council, it was recommended that I did not go for a fourth village, especially where Population Council did not have connections to facilitate and arrange for my interviews with young girls. Instead, they advised me to meet with non-*Neqdar Nesharek* participants in the same three villages that I selected for this study. This turned out to be a viable idea in that it eased the recruitment process of non-*Neqdar Nesharek* young women, as I discuss in the following section.

Sampling and recruitment of participants

Forty young women participated in this study. Thirty-two participants were former participants of *Neqdar Nesharek* program and the remaining eight participants were non-*Neqdar Nesharek* young women. All forty women met the following selection criteria:

- They were female,
- They were between the age of 18 and 25,
- They were from the three chosen villages in Fayoum,

- They were participants of the *Neqdar Nesharek* (except for the eight non-participant sample)
- They were capable of and willing to attend an interview for about 60 minutes.

In addition to the 40 young women ages 18 - 25, the study sample included nine other participants: six parent/husband from the three villages, two project team members from the Population Council and its local partner NGO in Fayoum, and the president of the National Council for Women in Egypt. All 49 participants were interviewed in their locations with a few follow-up interviews with some of the young women. I prepared a consent form in Arabic and asked 46 of the 49 participants, including all of the young women, parents, and husbands, to complete the consent documents before the interviews. I was only able to secure verbal consent from the other three interviewees who were in senior management positions. One reason for this was that some of the participants who were on the project team felt that, as senior level staff, they were not directly involved in the project. The other reason was related to the local culture in which it may have been perceived as impolite to ask a ministerial level politician, such as the president of NCW, to take time to complete a research consent form. In addition to interviews, I also conducted many observations and had numerous informal conversations while I was in the field.

In my preparation for the recruitment of research participants, I was cognizant of the fact that, as a male researcher, interviewing young women in rural conservative societies may entail some challenges, including challenges in accessing and recruiting participants. In anticipation of these challenges, I hired two research assistants from

Fayoum to help me in the recruiting process and with the interviews—Lamia and Omar (pseudonyms). Lamia is a female research assistant from Fayoum who was working in one of the agriculture co-ops there. Her role in the interview process was to accompany me to all interviews, which was critical to the success of the project, especially when interviews took place at the participants' homes. My other research assistant, Omar (male) was the former *Neqdar Nesharek* outreach and communication field officer who oversaw the program in Fayoum. He was nominated by the Population Council staff to assist me. Omar's input was very useful, especially during the recruitment of research participants, as all former participants of the program and their parents and/or husbands knew him. Both being from Fayoum, Lamia and Omar were tremendously helpful in checking and validating my interpretation of particular local events and my observations while in the village. In addition, the informal conversations I have had with Lamia and Omar during lunch breaks and while traveling between villages were extremely useful not only for checking and validating my interpretation of particular local events and my observations but also as a secondary source of data. My relationship with my two research assistants extended beyond the time I was in Fayoum doing this research, as they both agreed to work on transcribing the audio-recorded interviews. They even offered to remain in contact by phone, email, and Skype if I needed clarification on any point while analyzing the data.

The process of recruiting participants for this study was guided by my goal to provide an in-depth examination of women's lived experience with social networks as spaces for civic engagement. To select participants, I used a purposeful sample

framework that took educational background and socioeconomic variables into consideration, as I was only interested in interviewing less-advantaged young women and mainly those who attended the *Neqdar Nesharek* program. With that in mind, I consulted the *Neqdar Nesharek* program officers and program management in the Population Council office in Cairo as part of my preparation for the field work. The program officers showed interest in aiding me in my research and shared with me the roster of all former participants of the program, including their contact information. However, even with the roster, it was a challenge to secure the target sample for interviews of the former *Neqdar Nesharek* participants due to the fact that the *Neqdar Nesharek* program phased out in 2015, and some of the former participants had gotten married and moved out of the target villages. Additionally, the *Neqdar Nesharek* program was implemented between 2011 and 2014 and targeted young women ages 16 – 29. This constituted another challenge, since by the time I conducted my field research in 2016, former participants had moved from the age segment of 16 – 29 to the age segment of 21 – 34. Thus, my selection was limited to the women who were between 21 and 29 years of age at the time of the study, which was only about one quarter of the former participants of the *Neqdar Nesharek.* This age problem, coupled with that fact that most young women had gotten married and/or moved, constituted a significant challenge in the recruitment process.

I coordinated with the Population Council and its partner NGO in Fayoum to conduct three initial info sessions in the three selected villages in order to select 30 former *Neqdar Nesharek* participants. With the aim of recruiting 10 participants from each selected village, we invited all former participants of *Neqdar Nesharek* ages 25

years or less to attend an information session, and I conducted three consecutive 45-minute info sessions three days later. During the event, the project team introduced me to the audience of former program participants. When it was my turn to talk, I introduced my research assistants and myself by stating that I was in Fayoum in my capacity as a doctoral student conducting my dissertation research and expressed my appreciation for their willingness to take time to attend the event. I explained the purpose of my study and my rational for selecting their village, along with the other two villages. Before I opened up the floor for questions and answers, I emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary and each woman would be free to decide to end their participation at any point without any consequence. After I answered all questions from the attendees, I shared copies of the consent form in Arabic with them. Before I left the room, I announced that my research assistants would stay afterwards to set up interviews with those interested in participating in the research, which would be starting the next day.

Fortunately, by the end of the third session we had forty-eight participants total signed up to participate in the research. Because I only needed 10 participants from each village, we decided to filter the lists, prioritizing the youngest women and women who were not married. However, not married women were quite limited in number and therefore I chose many who were married. One reason for this is that demographic might affect civic engagement differently from those who are now married and may have less restriction on mobility from their parents. The women who were not included as participants were added to a back-up list in case of any dropouts. Later that day in a routine reflection and wrap-up meeting with my research assistants, Lamia explained to

me why there was such a high turnout of young women who signed up to participate in the research: She said, “Women mistakenly believe that the *Neqdar Nesharek* project will commence again and that by signing up with us they may have the priority to be selected as participants in the new phase of the project”. Upon hearing this, I decided to make it clear from the beginning of every interview that my study was not related to the *Neqdar Nesharek* program and their participation in the research was not related to any potential participation in the program. None of the women withdrew their participation after being explicitly told this, and I ended up recruiting and interviewing thirty-two women from the former participants of *Neqdar Nesharek* (11 participants from Hope Village, 11 participants from Dream Village, and 10 participants from Bright Village).

Although this was not a comparison study, my research also drew on the experience of young women in Fayoum who had not participated in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program. Because *Neqdar Nesharek* appeared to have played an extremely significant role in facilitating the creation of informal networks and equipping women with new civic knowledge and life skills, which was later corroborated by my data, I decided to recruit eight non-*Neqdar Nesharek* young women from the same three villages in order to understand how other young women in the same communities develop and sustain informal networks. To recruit these non-participants, I utilized a one-stage snowball sample (Creswell, 2003), relying primarily on the women who had already been recruited from the former *Neqdar Nesharek* program to suggest other young women from their villages and to connect me with them. Demographic information for the forty women participants is presented in Table 3.1., including the participant distribution by name

(pseudonym), location, age, educational (completion of primary, preparatory, or secondary school), and marital status, and status as former *Neqdaer Nesharek* participant or non-*Neqdar Nesharek* participant; yes means at least completion of primary education

During my prolonged stay in the field, particularly through the interviews, I also used the snowball as a useful technique to recruit parents and husbands of the participants for the study. I recruited one parent and one husband of a participant from each village. The three parents of participants were Tahani, Nawal, and Nadia and the three husbands of participants were Gamal, Ahmed, and Nasser (pseudonyms). Including the six parents/husbands, the total sample size of this study was 49 participants (32 women from former *Neqdar Nesharek*, 8 non-*Neqdar Nesharek* women, 6 parents/husbands, 2 project officers, and the president of the NCW). I secured an interview with the president of the NCW by contacting her through her personal email, as we were work colleagues in different capacities.

Table 3.1. Participant demographic information and distribution by name (pseudonym)

Name	**Village**	**Age**	**Educated (Yes/No)**	**Marital Status**	**Group**
Amira	Hope	20	Yes	Married	Participant
Hannan	Hope	22	Yes	Married	Participant
Rasha	Hope	24	Yes	Married	Participant
Sawsan	Hope	19	Yes	Married	Participant
Nashwa	Hope	21	Yes	Married	Participant
Reda	Hope	21	No	Married	Participant
Nora	Hope	22	Yes	Married	Participant
Saleema	Hope	24	Yes	Divorced	Participant
Warda	Hope	21	Yes	Married	Participant
Zainab	Hope	24	No	Married	Participant
Ola	Hope	20	No	Married	Participant
Menna	Hope	19	Yes	Married	Non-participant
Nesma	Hope	18	Yes	Single	Non-participant

Manal	Hope	20	Yes	Married	Non-participant
Heba	Dream	21	Yes	Married	Participant
Nabila	Dream	24	Yes	Married	Participant
Dalia	Dream	21	Yes	Married	Participant
Mona	Dream	21	Yes	Married	Participant
Doha	Dream	20	Yes	Married	Participant
Malak	Dream	24	Yes	Married	Participant
Iman	Dream	25	Yes	Married	Participant
Amina	Dream	25	Yes	Married	Participant
Marwa	Dream	22	Yes	Married	Participant
Noha	Dream	21	Yes	Married	Participant
Samaa	Dream	21	Yes	Married	Participant
Nahed	Dream	19	Yes	Married	Non-participant
Soha	Dream	18	No	Single	Non-participant
Salma	Bright	23	Yes	Married	Participant
Abeer	Bright	23	Yes	Married	Participant
Laila	Bright	21	Yes	Married	Participant
Nahla	Bright	24	Yes	Married	Participant
Samia	Bright	20	Yes	Married	Participant
Nayera	Bright	24	Yes	Married	Participant
Omaima	Bright	21	Yes	Married	Participant
Sabreen	Bright	23	Yes	Married	Participant
Doreya	Bright	25	Yes	Widow	Participant
Nevine	Bright	22	Yes	Married	Participant
Rawya	Bright	18	Yes	Single	Non-participant
Sabah	Bright	19	Yes	Married	Non-participant
Wafaa	Bright	18	Yes	Married	Non-participant

Finally, my stay at the research sites in Fayoum was crucial in allowing me to reach a data saturation point, to establish rapport with young women and their parents/husbands, to conduct repeated observations, and, most importantly, to solidify evidence by taking time to compare my data to my initial hunches, as well as to compare interview data with data from observations.

Research methods

In contrast with the methodological approach and the research methods used by SYPE to assess civic engagement of young women in Fayoum, which employed exclusively questionnaire and closed-ended techniques, the mode of inquiry of this study employed open-ended techniques to ensure thick description of participants' situations and emic. Creswell and Miller (2000) contend that open-ended techniques allow for prolonged engagement with participants in the field and are useful for "constructivists [who] believe in pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended, and contextualized perspectives toward reality" (p. 125). These techniques were consistent with this qualitative study and its phenomenological and ethnographic considerations.

To examine the everyday lived experiences of rural women in their villages in Fayoum, I utilized a combination of open-ended research methods. I used in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. In addition, I used focus group discussion, nonparticipant observation, reflective journaling, and document analysis to supplement the data collection process. During some of the in-person interviews, I also adopted storytelling techniques, on which I elaborate in the section that follows. Furthermore, despite the fact that my initial plan was not to include informal conversation in my analysis, I found it to be a good source of data during the field research. In the following section, I briefly justify the selection of these methods.

Semi-structured interviews

The foundation of this study is my interest in learning how rural young women learn to participate in public life. The goal of each interview, therefore, was to encourage

each woman to tell stories that reflect her lived experiences not only within social networks, but also in her everyday life within her society and family. The strength of semi-structured interviews, as the most commonly used qualitative research method, lies in its flexibility (Creswell, 2003). The absence of a concrete format in the semi-structured interview provides researchers with opportunities to explore beyond the research topic, or to pursue unexpected topics and themes that emerge during the interview (Chambers, 1994, 2014). In addition, because this study also draws on phenomenological methods, the interviews served the very specific purpose of exploring and gathering narrative material about individuals' experiences and stories that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of the social network and civic engagement phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). As part of this study, I conducted 36 individual semi-structured interviews with participants, including three follow up interviews about their everyday lives in rural Fayoum.

Focus group discussion

While one-on-one semi-structured interview was a useful method in collecting information about the personal experiences of young women (which may entail sensitive social information), the focus group discussions were employed to address the more common issues that affect most, if not all, young women in rural Fayoum. Focus groups, according to Krueger and Casey (2014), are an appropriate research tool that can provide a comfortable environment for conversation. In this vein, I found that the three focus group meetings provided the young women with a space in which they felt comfortable sharing information amongst themselves, including information that they would not

necessary have felt comfortable sharing in an individual interview. Furthermore, employing focus groups created an environment that enabled participation. This may be related to Brady's (2005) observation that young women in rural societies in Egypt tend to find it safer to participate in public events with a group of peers. Chronologically, I chose to facilitate the focus group discussions after conducting the semi-structured interviews in order to give the groups of women a chance to elaborate on recurring issues and concerns that came up during the one-to-one semi-structured interviews and observations, as well as to clarify any ambiguities such as women's recounts on their self-created women's groups and their use of different strategies to force their new roles on their families as I will discuss in Chapter 5. Throughout this study, I conducted a focus group discussion in each of the three selected villages (Hope Village, Dream Village, and Bright Village) in order to collect primary data from young women. Because the aim of these focus group meetings was not limited to women's experience within the informal social networks that were created as a byproduct of their participation with the *Neqdar Nesharek* program, I invited a mix of former participants of *Neqdar Nesharek* and nonparticipants, all from the same village.

Storytelling Technique

Given the nature of the topic of this study—informal social networks and civic engagement of young women—and the nature of the research context in rural Egypt, it was expected that young women might use their own local terms to refer to issues like "civic engagement," "learning," and "social capital." For this reason, I decided to use the 'storytelling technique' in order to elicit information and facilitate conversation while

also avoiding interruptions that would restrict the flow of conversation. Storytelling is a "vehicle for understanding, explaining, and comparing local culture [that can be used to] examine and correlate interpersonal relationships" (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993, p. 1391). In our case, the storytelling technique involved simply asking guiding questions to help women to talk and tell stories without interruption. This technique was effective in acquiring a massive amount of unexpected data, which proved especially useful when I discovered that reviewing relevant literature about rural societies in Fayoum did not provide a complete picture of these societies. Chambers (1994) contends that rural social dynamics are often unseen and misperceived by outsiders. One reason for this, according to Chambers, is that researchers often lack appreciation for knowledge and capabilities of rural people and thus, their research does "not fully reveal the richness of detail and discrimination expressed by villagers" (p. 1255). In the same vein, Hansen and Kahnweiler (1993) highlighted that the beauty of the storytelling technique is that the researcher plays a lesser role; thus, they are less likely to impose their understanding of a phenomenon that may be used (or termed) differently by local communities.

In addition, the use of storytelling during field research played a catalytic role in engendering deeper understanding of the lived experiences of women. Because the storytelling technique requires that there be trust between researcher and interviewees, my use of storytelling was contingent upon this, and was only employed in the later stages of field research to allow time to establish trust. Finally, I encouraged using storytelling in those cases when semi-structured interview did not produce sufficient data to create understanding of the phenomenon, which was the case in three follow-up

interviews with Saleema, Marwa, and Laila (pseudonyms), as I discuss in the upcoming data collection section.

Observation

During my stay in Fayoum for the purpose of conducting field research, I had the opportunity to walk through the communities, shop, eat, and hangout in local coffee shops with local residents. Such opportunities allowed me to observe the current living conditions in the three rural villages (Hope Village, Dream Village, and Bright Village). This repeated observation, similar to ethnography, painted a clearer picture of the context in which young women live and provided me with insight into the circumstances that shape their experiences. Observation, therefore, was an important data collection technique for this qualitative research. Though it was not my primary data collection technique, I used unstructured observation to contribute to building a complete picture of the civic engagement of young women in the three selected villages. Unlike structured observation, unstructured observation does not require the researcher to follow a checklist of predetermined behaviors (Mulhall, 2003). In addition to its function as a data collection method, I also used unstructured observation to check the extent to which young women do what they said they do in the interviews. In this sense, I utilized observation as a tool for understanding the contexts and the environments in which women live, as well as the various gender roles that are constructed as social norms in these rural communities. One limitation of observation as a research method is that, as Creswell (2003) states, the "researcher may be seen as intrusive" (p. 186). For this reason, I limited my use of observation to complement my primary methods and to help

paint a complete picture of the research sites during my two-month stay. Although some ethnographers argue it isn't necessary the length of time but the quality of time and the engagement in the community, I considered both quality of engagement and the proper length.

Reflective journal

Throughout the study, I used reflective journaling as a crosscutting method; I documented my experiences throughout the interviews, focus group discussions, document reviews, and observation in order to keep record of important non-verbal expressions of young women and other participants. Employing reflective journaling facilitated my early data analysis process, as it provided me the opportunity to reflect upon every interview and observation. Though both are valid data collection methods, interview and reflective journaling serve distinct purposes. While the interviews captured the participants own words and feelings, reflective journaling was used to record my own feelings and observations of an event as a researcher (Yin, 1993). I organized my reflection journal in a three-column format: I recorded the date and location and in the right column, and I wrote my reflections based on the research questions of this study in the first and second left columns. At the end of my data collection process, and as I started the data analysis process, I reread my journal with the research questions in mind and added other thoughts that came to mind. I then organized all my reflections into readable narrative descriptions to supplement my interview transcripts and the synthesis of the thematic analysis.

Textual analysis of secondary resources

I employed textual analysis of secondary resources as a data collection technique in two stages. First, during the preparation phase, I acquainted myself with the research context by reviewing secondary resources about the sociopolitical and socioeconomic situation of my target research sites, young women in rural societies, the SYPE, and the *Neqdar Nesharek* program. These materials included reports, evaluations, and publications of SYPE and *Neqdar Nesharek*. Later, during the field research, I used textual analysis for triangulation as a strategy to mitigate threats to validity, as I discuss later.

Data Collection

Several data sources and procedures were utilized in the process of collecting the data for this study, including open-ended semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, unstructured observation, reflective journaling, and textual analysis. In this study, in-depth semi-structured in-person interviews and focus group discussion were the primary methods of data collection. All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Arabic, audio-recorded with the permission of the participants, and transcribed and annotated using field reflective journaling. I also used nonparticipant observation, reflective journaling, and textual analysis to supplement my data collection process. During some of the in-depth interviews, I encouraged young women to use the storytelling technique to enable them to make meaning of their experience and to move swiftly between narrating memories and providing reflection on their previous experiences, as recommended by Hansen and Kahnweiler (1993).

Thirty-six in-depth semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions were conducted as part of this study where four women attended the focus groups only. I conducted one focus group discussion in each of the three villages: Hope Village, Dream Village, and Bright Village. Each focus group was made up of 5 – 6 participants, one of which was a non-*Neqdar Nesharek* participant. I scheduled three follow-up interviews with Saleema from Hope Village, Marwa from Dream Village, and Laila from Bright Village. During these three separate interviews, two participants (Saleema and Laila) invited me to see what they believed to be tangible and vivid examples of their recent civic engagement in their villages. For example, because I did not understand what she was referring to when she mentioned the phrase "peanut separation process" in her interview, Marwa offered to meet me again to show me what she meant. Later, Marwa took us to a peanut plant and explained what women do when they meet. Basically, this plant was a place where women informally meet and chat in her village. I provide detailed discussions on these civic engagement examples and informal avenues that women use as gathering spaces in chapter five and six of this dissertation.

The interviews were conducted in different places based on whom I was interviewing and the type of interview being conducted. While most of one-to-one interviews took place at young women's homes with the consent of their parents, husbands, or mother in-law, all focus group discussion meetings took place in public spaces (i.e. local community development association and community school). Most of the individual interviews took place in *mandara* (an Arabic term means guestroom). *Mandara* is a separate room attached to most extended family houses with a separate

entrance; some of them furnished with a couch and four chairs and others with a carpet and several floor cushions and poufs. Two of the focus groups and some individual interviews took place in a small meeting room furnished with a rectangle table and number of wooden chairs at two local community development associations. The third focus group took place in a schoolroom of community school where I had the opportunity to rearrange the seating into a round format. All these locations provided a private and comfortable place for each woman to discuss her experience with my research assistants and me.

During the in-depth semi-structured interviews, I took the full responsibility to ask the same set of questions to all the participants. The role of my female research assistance, who accompanied me to all interviews, was a rapport builder and gatekeeper as discussed earlier. The interview questions were designed to examine each woman's learning experiences, how she went about learning something that she needed to know, and how she appropriated those learning experiences to develop greater involvement in the public life of her society. The questions focused on: educational experiences, family background, their experience with the *Neqdar Nesharek* program and affiliation with networks, their relationships with their peers, what and how they learn and teach each other, how they appropriate and relate what they learn in the network to their engagement in the public life of their society, any challenges they faced, and what strategies they employ to deal with such challenges. While the first three general questions centered on the women's lives, the rest of the questions are, as described by Creswell (2003), topical questions focusing on informal learning and civic engagement—the main topic of this

dissertation. Creswell recommended the use of factual, background and experience questions as introductory questions because they are easier for participants to answer and engage with. This proved a good strategy to get the women to start talking in most of my interviews. In addition to these questions, at the end of the interview, I asked the participants a yes/no question about whether they know the name of the governor of Fayoum. This question was important in contrasting my methods with the methodological approach of SYPE as I indicated in the problem statement in chapter one of this dissertation. Finally, the data collection process was also supplemented by data I sought through examining the *Neqdar Nesharek* final report and other publications.

Data Analysis

The data analysis of this study was guided by a constructivist approach and the conceptual framework developed for this study laid out in chapter one. I took an inductive analysis approach to generate categories, themes, and codes from the raw data collected from various data sources, as proposed by Creswell and Miller (2000) and discussed earlier in this chapter. This inductive approach was effective in constructing a connected view of women's lived experiences of networks and civic engagement.

My data analysis process started early—while I was still in the field conducting research. At the end of each interviewing day, I listened to the audio-recordings to identify any missing information or any situation described by women that needed further explanation. Because I stayed most of the time in Fayoum, I also had a chance to start transcribing the data at the end of each day. This was useful not only because I was able to organize the tremendous amount of research data, but also because I got to hear all the

audio-recorded interviews again, transcribe them, and get a sense of what I had covered and what still needed further research.

In order to manage the massive amount of data, I adopted Marshall and Rossman's (2005) approach where I structured my data analysis process in seven stages: organizing the data; immersion in the data; coding the data; writing analytical memos; generating categories, themes, and clusters; offering interpretations; and writing the report. This structure served as a mind map for the analysis process and offered me flexibility to go back and forth between different stages (rather than in a strictly consecutive manner). While interpretation constituted one stage of my seven-stage structure, this did not indicate a shift in my theoretical perspective. During the interviews, young women constructed different, yet valid, meanings of social network and civic engagement. Because interpretivism is a theoretical perspective linked to constructivism, as asserted by Marshall and Rossman (2005), I, therefore, interpreted meanings constructed by the women in relation to the same phenomenon under investigation by this research.

Soon after inductively collecting the data for this study, I simultaneously listened to and read the transcripts several times to ensure accuracy, as the data was transcribed by three different persons (the two research assistants and me). This step gave me the opportunity not only to validate the accuracy of the interview transcripts, but also to deeply immerse myself in the data. After ensuring accuracy, I assigned pseudonyms to all participants, parents and husbands of participants, and villages where participants live to ensure anonymity. I then printed all the transcripts to start the systematic coding

process. Following my seven-phase structure, I began to analyze the data, taking reflective notes and analytic memos whenever patterns emerged that suggested relationships between variables.

Guided by my inductive attempt to capture new insights, I utilized a strategy that is often called open coding, which involves repeating the coding stage several times (Maxwell, 2013). After I organized my data, I started to delve into the data to ensure that there was not any ambiguity and discrepancy between the audio-recorded interviews and the transcribed data. Though back in the U.S., at this stage, I was still in direct contact with my two research assistants who had offered to meet with any of the women on my behalf or connect me to participants via cellphone if I came across any missing pieces or unclear topics, as I began the analysis of the data.

I went through the process of coding my data several times, intentionally allowing longer periods between each session so that I could come to the data with a fresh mind. Unsurprisingly, I continued to add new codes every time I visit the transcribed data or the audio recording. In this sense, the systematic coding process was a central stage of my data analysis not only because it was useful in bring together and organizing the fractured data but also because it served as a foundation to arrange the data into categories that later facilitated the organization of data into broader themes (Maxwell, 2013). In addition, returning to the research data over and over again lead to the evolution of a persuasive narrative that ensured credibility and validity of my analysis and the inferences drawn from them, as contended by Maxwell.

As a means of sorting the massive amount of descriptive data that I collected, I organized the codes of this study into three broader coding categories developed by Maxwell (2013): "organizational, substantive, and theoretical categories" (p. 107). The organizational categories are the broad issues that constitute the focus of this study and include social networks, informal learning, and civic engagement examples. These organizational categories served as the boxes into which I sorted the data for further analysis. The (over 15) substantive categories included women's own words and concepts such as definition of civic engagement and their distinction between civic engagement in village activities and state's run activities, as well as their own meaning and understanding of different issues related to this study. One example of codes under the substantive category of "*anshetit el-balad* (state's civic activities) as narrated by women include codes such as elections, youth centers, women's clubs, and volunteer clubs. Another example is the substantive category of lack of national identification that includes codes such as undocumented early marriage, mandatory military service, and Libyan ancestry as I will discuss in detail in the following data chapters. These are generally called emic categories (Maxwell, 2013). Substantive categories, according to Maxwell, are primarily descriptive. One example of a theme that was extensively repeated by most participants was the way the young women utilized the life skills that they learned from each other to advance their civic engagement and to gain recognition from their families and society. The last categories were the theoretical categories and included my own concepts as a researcher which Maxwell called etic categories. The codes in this category were those related to the prior theories that I indicated in my

theoretical framework in chapter one and all other inductively developed concepts and theories.

I combined my observation notes, reflective journal, and notes generated by examining the *Neqdar Nesharek*'s reports and publications to the interview transcripts and they were all coded using an open coding strategy. In order to identify themes and connections between the data, I read all the transcripts line by line. I included generic codes using the three broader categories I discussed earlier. Similar to my repetitive process in creating codes, I repeatedly reviewed my codes to narrow them down to a more focused list. I then used this focused list to identify recurring themes to develop a deeper understanding of women's experiences and the meanings that they constructed during the interviews.

After comparing all of my codes again with the interviews transcripts to ensure that all the data were correctly entered under each code, I began to sort them into thematic categories, according to the emerging patterns and themes. I started by using a broad thematic analysis exercise. Examples of thematic categories are women's distinction between state's sponsored civic activities "*anshetit el-balad* (state's civic activities) and *mashakel karietna* (civic activities related to local "problems of our village"; and the different strategies they applied to force their new roles on their families that included "confrontation strategy, adaptation strategy, a mix of confrontation and adaptation strategy, submission strategy, co-optation strategy, and, as coined by the young women themselves, "fabricating strategy" as I will discuss in Chapter 6. Thematic analysis, as described by Creswell (2003), is a group of procedures for examining the

data to identify the themes and emerging patterns in the data that provide the foundation for building theory and providing explanations for how or why things happen. Using this process of data synthesis, I developed themes and grouped them according to related categories. Once I completed this process and felt satisfied with my focused list of codes and themes, I moved into the interpretation phase, in which I used the different categories of coherent codes and themes to attempt to answer the research questions posed in chapter one. By then, I was ready to start the last phase of my seven-stage structure: writing the report.

Validity

The issue of validity addressed in this study is also governed by a constructivist paradigm. There are two school of thoughts on the applicability of this paradigm. The first, as asserted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), does not favor the constructivists' framework of validity, as it rejects its basic realist assumption that there is a reality external to our perception of it. Other scholars, such as Creswell and Miller (2000), hold that validity is an important process that aims to ensure the accuracy of the results in representing realities of participants in a social phenomenon where the credibility of these results stems from the participants' acceptance of them. In alignment with the latter school of thought, my choice of validity procedures relies on the views of participants of the study, the people who read the study, as well as on my views as the researcher and those of the research team for this study. Two validity threats, according to Maxwell (2013), could lead to invalid conclusions: research bias and reactivity. Research bias occurs when there is bias in selecting the research data. Maxwell noted that this type of

validity threat happens when researchers select the wrong data for the theory they are trying to test. The second validity threat occurs when researchers influence the research in terms of the settings or the people they investigate.

By design, this study employed tenets of credibility and trustworthiness. In order to ensure credibility in collecting the data for this study, I considered disconfirming evidence and triangulation. The study relied on multiple sources of data including semi-structured in-depth interviews, observation, textual analysis, and informal conversations. The multiple interviews with large number of participants coupled with repeated observations and follow-up interviews ensured saturation and prolonged engagement with my participants in the field. Returning to my data several times during my analysis, as mentioned earlier, was a strategy I chose because it allowed me to become immersed in the data and to ensure thick and rich description of the participants, settings and themes. In addition, in order to emphasize the thick and rich description of the participants, settings and themes, I dedicate the majority of chapter four to providing detailed contextualization of the young women in Fayoum, their villages, and the different discourses that affect their everyday lives in their society. Furthermore, as an additional measure to ensure validity, the data analysis was discussed over Skype with my two research assistants in Fayoum (Lamia and Omar) and was examined by colleagues to verify the credibility and reliability of the study's findings.

Finally, as observation was one of my data collection techniques, I was also mindful of the validity threats associated with observation. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) assert that observation during narrative research includes participants and

nonparticipants, and researchers may draw conclusions based on nonparticipants that they unconsciously apply to participants who do not share the same traits of those who they mistakenly observe. With this in mind, I developed and employed a set of criteria to identify my target group, and my observations strictly targeted those who met the criteria of the target unit of analysis. In few cases, I made some important observations about individuals who were not my targeted participants, so I used my reflective journal to note the incidence and its location in addition to my own reflection. Furthermore, both the relatively small size of the research sample per village and my prolonged engagement with my participants mitigated this threat, as I was easily able to identify and distinguish between participants and nonparticipants.

Summary

This chapter outlined the research methodology and methods I employed to collect and analyze the primary data for this study. The research design and the selection of appropriate data collection methods for the study were governed by a constructivist paradigm assumption. This qualitative study utilized a combination of open-ended research methods. I used in-depth one-to-one semi-structured interviews as the primary method to interview and collect data from the former participants of the *Neqdar Nesharek* program, non-*Neqdar Nesharek* participants, and some of the parents and husbands of participants who live in one of three selected villages in Fayoum. I also used focus group discussion, observation, reflective journaling, and document analysis to supplement the data collection process. The chapter discussed the appropriateness of using an inductive analysis approach to analyze the collected data and the adoption of the seven-stage

structure to manage and analyze the massive amount of data and generate categories, themes, and codes from the collected raw data, which are described in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Four: Paradoxical discourses

This chapter introduces participants' recounting of the different discourses that contribute to shape their roles and identities in relation to their public participation. The chapter is set to answer the first research question: how do young women in Fayoum understand the social and political issues that impact their lives and identities within their communities? In doing so, I cluster those conflicting discourses that contribute to shape women's roles and identities, into two main categories: constraining discourses that contribute to limit women participation in the state's civic activities and encouraging discourses that women seen as potentials for greater involvement in the public life of their society. The findings of this chapter provide foundation for answering the rest of the research questions and for introducing how young women utilize unconventional avenues to advance their civic engagement.

Introduction

"Rural women" is a label that creates contention for young women in Hope, Dream, and Bright villages in Fayoum. While some may argue that this label is 'just language', it represents a struggle over conflicting values and ideologies for Fayoumi women. Language, as maintained by Grace and Lennie (1998), constructs and engenders the hegemonic culture, values, and ideologies of rural women and is not just a neutral means of expression; rather, it is "defined as a site of struggle in which some voices or discourses are heard and dominate while others are silenced and suppressed" (p. 357). In the following discussion, I describe how collective identity is established and how the social roles and identities of young rural women in Fayoum are constructed.

Throughout the interviews, young women distinguished between two concepts of public participation. One concept is related to participation in state sponsored activities, which includes political participation and participation in local women's clubs located in youth centers and run by the government. The other is participation in activities that they initiated and were related to their livelihood due to the lack of many essential basic public services. While women showed no interest in participating in the former and listed several reasons for their reticence, they provided several civic engagement examples for the latter. Most women expressed that their limited civic and public participation is a result of the socially constructed identities and gender roles that are imposed on them in their villages rather than a result of their own personal choices and rational decision-making. Based on their narrations, I learned that women's decisions to participate or to refrain from participation are influenced by constraining and encouraging discourses. The data reveals that there are various discourses surrounding young women in rural Fayoum. This chapter introduces a number of discourses that affect the everyday lives of young women and their public participation, including their participation in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program, which emerged from the analysis of interview findings, as well as the textual analysis of *Neqdar Nesharek* reports and other relevant documents. While these women's responses to interview questions indicate that their identities are constructed in discourses related to power, these discourses, might not be exclusive to former participants of the *Neqdar Nesharek* program, or exclusive to women. Because there are numerous discourses that directly or indirectly relate to the public participation of women in any given society, for the purpose of this study, I only address the discourses that directly affect women's engagement as constructed by young women themselves. I

classify these conflicting discourses, as narrated by rural women, into two main areas: constraining discourses and encouraging discourses. This chapter employs a number of methodological tools to describe how women narrate these discourses in relation to their civic engagement.

In order to represent women's narratives of various discourses of their everyday lives, this chapter takes the form of "writing against culture," a process which Abu-Lughod (1991) describes as "more of a political project than existential one" (p. 148). In writing this chapter, therefore, I adopt Abu-Lughod's (1991) three-mode strategy of writing against culture: discourse and practice, connections, and ethnographies of the particular. An important benefit of this strategy, as noted by Abu-Lughod, is its potential for helping the novice researcher to avoid the common problem of overgeneralization. As explained by Abu-Lughod, when one "generalizes from experiences and conversations with a number of specific people in a community, one tends to flatten out differences among them and to homogenize them" (p. 152). The 'discourse and practice' strategy enables researchers to recognize multiple competing statements with actual consequences for particular groups in society. The 'connection' strategy, as asserted by Abu-Lughod, involves a shift in gaze to include phenomena in the community that are not limited to historical connections but also to national and transnational connections between people, cultural forms, locus, and other public issues or commodities as I discuss in the following section. Finally, the purpose of the 'ethnographies of the particular' strategy is not simply to privilege micro processes of presenting women's lives over macro, but rather to employ ethnographic writing that reflects prolonged engagement

with participants, provides a discourse of familiarity in which the actions of women living their particular lives are better conveyed, and brings the language of their everyday life closer to the intended audience of this research.

The remainder of this chapter discusses these two broad discourses (constraining and encouraging) with the aim of painting a picture of the participants and their situations that provides insight into what it means to be a young woman in Fayoum using narratives from the young women themselves. This picture portrays the conflicting discourses that shape the everyday lives of young women in their three local communities: Hope Village, Dream Village, and Bright Village. This chapter serves as a foundation for introducing how young women utilize unconventional learning avenues to develop their civic engagement, which is further discussed in chapter five and chapter six.

Constraining discourses

Throughout the interviews, women bluntly narrated various discourses that together limit and constrain their role in the public life of their local societies and help to explain their intentional apathy towards participating in politics in general. In this regard, women made clear distinctions between their participation in *anshetit el-balad* (state's civic activities) and *mashakel karietna* (civic activities related to local "problems of our village"). Women asserted that they decided not to participate in the first form for several reasons, which I represent below. Later, I use the concept of "latent participation," coined by Ekman and Amna (2012), to argue that women's decisions not to participate in state civic activities is also a mode of engagement and could even be

seen as an act of civic engagement represented in their resistance to state policies or roles that do or do not affect their lives.

In their interviews, almost all participants from the three villages (young women, parents, and husbands) explicitly or implicitly alluded to election fraud when I turned the discussion to their public participation, and they narrated different incidents that reflected a wide spread election fraud in Egypt. According to Hafner-Burton, Hyde and Jablonski (2014), and Sanyal (2015), electoral fraud and manipulation employed by authoritarian regimes take a variety of forms. These forms, however, may intensify when used against women to intimidate them and limit their participation (Blaydes & Tarouty, 2009).

Iman, a 25-year-old married woman from Dream Village, shed light on one form of election fraud when she narrated her voting experience. Iman told this story to justify why she decided to no longer participate in state civic activities:

> Baldly, we [women in Fayoum] don't participate in elections because of the manifested widespread election fraud here…during election time they came to ask us if we do have national ID or not, and when we said yes, they took us in a truck to the school [polling center] and they gave us 20 pounds[4] each… one kilo of sugar and a bottle of cooking oil and asked us to vote for a person whose name was handwritten in a small piece of paper the guy handed to each of us. Frankly, I decided to go in order to get the money and the grocery. But when we arrived at the school the guy asked us to get off the truck and leave the 20 pounds, the sugar, and the oil until we vote and head back to the village…I did vote, but I will never go again because I don't like that.

[4] Equivalent to approximately 3 USD at that time

Iman's account supports the assertion made by Blaydes and Tarouty (2009) that election season in Egypt is seen by some as an opportunity for making additional income through the illegal recruitment of women voters in slum urban areas in big cities like Cairo and Alexandria, especially poor women from working backgrounds. While Iman's example represents a form of election fraud that may be welcomed by some voters, as noted by Blaydes and Tarouty, participants Hannan and Nora described election fraud techniques of a more menacing nature (i.e., sexual harassment and stigma). Hannan, a 22-year-old married woman from Hope Village, narrated how, in contrast to the election bribe technique, sexual harassment on Election Day is not welcomed by any woman. Hannan said that she has never voted or participated in any state civic activities. In fact, she said that her family has always banned her from going to the election because a lot of "*maskhara wi taharosh*" ("sluttish behavior and sexual harassment") takes place on Election Day. Hannan added that "…they [the regime] do that using thugs to block women from reaching election sites and to cause them to fear a scandal." This conforms to Blaydes and Tarouty's assertion that, at elections, there are "increased levels of harassment of women by hired thugs, particularly female [voters]" (p. 276).

Nora, a 22-year-old married woman from Hope Village, also talked about stigma surrounding elections. Nora, like Hannan, mentioned that she has never voted and will never do so. Then, to implicitly tell me that she thinks it is a meaningless process, she directed the question to me: "Why should I?" When she realized I was not going to answer her question, she continued:

> Don't you remember what happened after the 25 January [the political uprisings in Egypt], do you remember when they scandalized those girls and young women who participated in the referendum on the constitution and those who protested against the regime. They tested their virginity! …and everyone heard about it in different media… Imagine I participated with them, what should I tell my family. They would have undoubtedly slaughtered me.

Hannan and Nora's examples represent one of the many barriers that restrict women's participation in formal civic engagement and particularly elections, especially in conservative rural societies like their village in rural Fayoum. This recount may proof the effectiveness of the regime using threatening strategies to intimidate women from participation where even the perceived threat of being sexually harassed or losing virginity is seen as inflicting shame on a woman and her family. However, while what Iman, Hannan and Nora experienced are not exclusive to young women in Fayoum, as they may affect other women in other rural and urban communities in Egypt, there are indeed barriers that are particular to people in Fayoum.

A common theme that was bluntly narrated by most participants is the historical mistrust between most Fayoumi residents and the successive governments since the assassination of former president Anwar Sadat in 1981 through the election of former president Mohamed Morsi in 2012 and then of his ouster in 2013.

In her effort to justify why she encouraged her daughter to participate in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program, Nadia, a widow from Bright village in her sixties and the mother of Nayera, referred to the deteriorated economic situation in Fayoum. Nadia

identified the sixties and the seventies as the era in which she thinks her governorate (Fayoum) dramatically changed for the worse. She said:

> Can you believe that Beni Suef [the neighboring governorate] that used to be the poorest governorate in the entire Egypt is now better than us? They have better roads and services than ours here in Fayoum. Young people there have variety of jobs and economic opportunities available for them. Fayoum was a tourist destination for elite Egyptians who used to come to swim and fish in the splendid Qaroun Lake including King Farouk [last king of Egypt before the military coup in 1952] who used to have a winter palace here in Fayoum. Look at all those good old Egyptian movies we enjoy today, they all pictured here in Fayoum. Today, we have no schools, no drinking water, poor medical service and only in the city center, the roads are bad as you can see, no tourism at all, the land became heath unsuitable for agriculture, the lake turned to a swamp unsuitable for fishing, and there are no jobs at all. Our sons fled [migrated] to work in Libya, Jordan, and Italy and they end up dying there and return bodies. This is why I wanted Nayera to join the program to learn or get a small loan to run a small business from home to pay for her *gihaz* [sets of home furnishings as a contribution of woman to the marriage] so she could marry.

I asked Nadia what happened that led to these deteriorated conditions. She chuckled and paused for a moment, then asked in an ironic way, “don’t you know?” When I intentionally didn’t answer her, she nodded her head toward Gamal, the husband of one of my research participants whom I had also interviewed in Bright Village, and said, “You tell him.” Gamal replied with only one word: “despotism.” I showed a sign of astonishment on my face, so Nadia continued her talk and again in an ironic way said, “Yes, because we [people of Fayoum] are terrorists.” She paused for a moment, and then kept talking: “We assassinated Sadat, we blew up America, and we blew up the bump in

the Beatrice church in Cairo." Then, to make it clear for me why the people of Fayoum are portrayed as terrorists, she said, "We even supported the terrorists Muslim Brotherhood[5] and its president Mohamed Morsi." At that point, I understood what was behind her sarcasm. When I asked her to elaborate on the relationship between these specific histories, situations, and events and the deteriorated economic and social conditions of her village, Nadia explained that the deterioration of life in Fayoum is a result of the government's intentional neglect of the governorate since the assassination of the former Egyptian president Sadat after a fatwa[6] made by Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman. Nadia and Gamal then explained the connection between Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, President Mohamed Morsi, the deteriorated situations, and the mutual mistrust between the government and the Fayoumi people. They began by explaining the connection between Fayoum and Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, the famous blind Egyptian Islamist.

Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, who was formerly an imam of a mosque in one of the Fayoum villages, was appointed as a professor at the Azhar University branch in Fayoum after obtaining his PhD. After the assassination of the former Egyptian president

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[5] The Muslim Brotherhood was launched as a religious movement in 1928 and is the country's oldest Islamist organization. It has influenced Islamist movements in different parts of the world with its model of political activism and charity work. After the anti-government revolutionary waves in 2010, the movement was allowed to establish its first political party: Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). In 2012, the chairman of the FJP, Mohamed Morsi, became Egypt's first democratically elected civilian president. On June 30, 2013 Morsi was overthrown by the military and a temporary president was appointed until a presidential election took place (BBC, 2013).

[6] "*Fatwa*" is an Arabic word that literally means "opinion". The word has religious roots in Islam; it is sometimes regarded as a religious ruling where scholars are expected to give their "*fatwa*" based on religious evidence and not on their personal opinions. In Egypt, the House of Fatwa (government institution for ruling of Islamic law and legal research) is the only authorized agency to provide "*fatwa*".

Sadat in 1981, Omar Abdel Rahman was arrested by the Egyptian government. Later he was released and traveled to the United States. In 1993, he was condemned and received a sentence of lifelong incarceration for planning and inciting the attack on the World Trade Center in New York. He died in prison in February 2017 (Prenston, 2014).

Beginning in 2012 during the presidential election in Egypt when Omar Abdel Rahman announced his support for presidential candidate Mohamed Morsi and later congratulated him as the elected president, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman and, consequently, Fayoum have been closely connected with Mohamed Morsi. Additionally, Fayoum was the highest governorate in percentage to vote for Mohamed Morsi (Sanyal, 2015). In his first speech as president, Morsi promised the proponents of Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman that he would release him from prison in the USA; and in his first week as president, Morsi paid his first official visit to Fayoum during which he gave a speech and prayed the Jumma (the weekly congregational prayer on Friday) at one of the mosques in Fayoum.

Nadia explained that, since the assassination of Sadat up until the day of my interview with her, there is increasing antipathy from "*al-askar*" ("the successive military regimes") toward the people of Fayoum. This hatred, Nadia said, "reached a peak after the election of Mohamed Morsi, especially after he came here in Fayoum immediately after he became the president." Then she added, "He [Mohamed Morsi] was the only president who ever came to Fayoum." By that point in the interview, I was hesitant to ask her if she and Gamal participated in the previous elections and referendums, but curiosity got the best of me. Although I tactfully phrased my question, asking about their

participation in public elections in general, which includes municipality elections, parliamentary elections, presidential elections, and referendums, Nadia responded promptly and bluntly: "Yes, I voted for Mohamed Morsi…this was the first and last time I voted." Gamal followed Nadia's bravery and voluntarily said, "I also voted for Morsi in the second round when I was told that either Morsi or the army general would be the president… but it was also the first and last time for me." I asked both of them why they had decided not to participate in election after that point and if they participated in *any* of the four different elections (i.e., two constitutional referendums, the 2014 presidential election, and the last parliamentary election) after their first experience. To this question Gamal responded, "No, we told you we won't ever participate again…who would participate in such a comic play." Then, to get a sense of whether this sentiment represents a common attitude among the people of Fayoum, or whether it is exclusive to Gamal and Nadia, I asked them whether their daughters and/or wives shared the same attitude about elections. Gamal replied, "They [military regime] don't differentiate between old or young we all receive harsh treatment. But, they put extra effort into exploiting young people and confine their effort to meaningless elections or useless youth centers…their brute security apparatus represses any true community involvement." Nadia agreed with Gamal about the harsh treatment that young people experience in Fayoum. She highlighted the massive number of young people "arrested" and the "enforced disappearances" from Fayoum that have occurred only in the last few years, but didn't want to provide detail. The narratives recounted by Nadia and Gamal highlight various strategies that have typically been employed by authoritarian regimes to restrict

public participation, as conceptualized by Albrecht (2013) (see chapter one of this dissertation).

Like Nadia, several young women revealed mutual mistrust between people in Fayoum and what they call the "military government." In a focus group meeting with young women in Hope Village, Rasha and Zainab claimed that their apathy in participating in state activities is due to the harsh treatment they face because of their *niqab*—a veil worn by some Muslim women in public, covering all their face except the eyes. Rasha said, "My friends and I are not affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood but officials of the military government treat us badly because they mistakenly identify us as members of the prohibited Muslim Brotherhood organization."

Zainab highlighted "inconvenience access" as another aspect that limits women's participation not only in national politics and voting activities but also in volunteer opportunities for local activities organized by the only "women's club" located in the youth center in the neighboring village. Zainab explained, "I coincidently heard that there is a women's club in the other village, but how can I go there with boys." She highlighted the difficulty, inappropriateness, and societal shame associated with using this particular women's club because it is "surrounded by a coffee shop full of men linger and hang around all the time…it is just a desolate room with a beautiful shiny and colorful government signboard but you cannot ever find a single woman there." While Zainab's claim is in line with what has been coined by Albrecht (2013) as "window dressing," a form of co-opted civil society, Brady (2005) asserted that young women in rural Egypt have even less access to youth centers or are completely excluded in some

societies. Due to culture and social norms, many youth centers become men-only spaces. As Brady states, “public space de facto becomes men’s space” (p. 40). In addition, young women and their families consider youth centers as institutions of the state as they recounted earlier.

Another complex theme that is closely related to women’s reticence in participating in state civic activities is the issue of national identification. Most young women in the three villages do not have any government documents (e.g., national ID, birth certificate, marriage certificate). The women that I interviewed explained that undocumented early marriage, mandatory military service, and Libyan ancestry are three intertwined factors that contribute to their lack of identification and participation in civic life that crosscuts several other areas of their everyday lives in rural Fayoum. While this complex theme may indicate that these women have incomplete citizenship, undocumented early marriage, avoiding mandatory military service, and Libyan ancestry seem to be a widely recognized and accepted reality for all those whom I interviewed in Fayoum, including young women, parents, husbands, and other individuals with whom I had informal conversations during my stay in Fayoum.

Early marriage in rural Upper Egypt is a social phenomenon produced by family traditions and social conservatism that negatively affects various aspects of the lives of young women, including educational prospects and public participation (Sallam, 2015a). A number of the young women I interviewed said that their marriages are undocumented and that this is common in their villages. The stories of Menna and Nabila represent two dimensions of this complex undocumented early marriage issue, and although the

situations surrounding the undocumented marriages of these two women are different, they share the same consequences. Menna, a 19-year-old mother of two children from Hope Village, married her cousin when she was sixteen. She has been married for more than three years and neither she, her husband, nor her two sons have birth certificates. Her husband's parents never registered the birth of her husband when he was born to avoid mandatory military service[7]. Sallam (2015a) reported that Upper Egyptian parents may choose not to register the births of their sons with the state to keep them from serving in the military so that they can help with agricultural work.

While this practice helps boys to avoid mandatory military service, it also unintentionally excludes them from being eligible to benefit from public services, such as attending public school or obtaining national ID. Menna shared the following about her husband's situation: "He cannot work fulltime and currently he is working in construction on a day-to-day basis…sometime we stay weeks without subsistence, but his mother lets us eat and drink with the rest of the family [extended family]". I asked Menna how long she, her husband, and their two sons have lived with her mother in law, and she replied, "I married there and have lived there since then." When I asked her how big the family is, she replied, "*mashallah* [god willing] my mother in law and all her nine sons along with their wives and children live in the same house…it's a big house."

[7] Military service in Egypt is mandatory for all male Egyptians after the age of 18 years. The duration of the mandatory service varies according to the level of education: three years for men who are uneducated or without a high school degree, two years for those with a high school or equivalent degree, and one year for those with a university degree. In some cases, university graduates serve for three year but with higher rank, such as officer rather than soldier (Frisch, 2013).

Unlike Menna, Nabila, a married 24-year-old mother of three from Dream village has a birth certificate and a national ID. Despite this, Nabila does not have a marriage certificate to prove the validity of her marriage of eight years because she married a man from the neighboring village who has neither a birth certificate nor an ID. Consequently, their two daughters and son do not have birth certificates either. Nabila explained that although she has a birth certificate and an ID, her marriage is undocumented because, like Menna's parent's, her husband's parents decided not to register him upon his birth. However, her husband's parents had a different reason for their decision. Nabila said, "My husband and his family are Libyan but they all were born here." I asked Nabila why they hadn't then documented their marriage at the Libyan embassy in Cairo. She replied, "He doesn't have Libyan documents either…there are too many people in the neighboring villages with Libyan descent but they live here because their lands and homes are here." I followed up by asking Nabila why she did not register her children with her ID instead. She responded in an ironic and angry tone: "My birth certificate and national ID are not enough to register them because they [the government] register based on the father's name…and I also don't like to have them registered here." Nabila later explained that her husband and all his brothers go to work and trade in Libya from time to time and that the opportunities are better there than any other limited opportunities in Fayoum. Nabila also attributed her apathy towards participating in state civic activities to her stronger loyalty to Libya, as her husband and his entire extended family that she is now a part of are Libyan. Similarly, several young women from Dream Village and Bright Village mentioned the lack of patriotism among their families as one of the reasons they feel that voting is not a civic obligation. Many carry the Egyptian

nationality as a prerequisite to live in Egypt, but believe that their ancestry belongs to Libya and being registered citizens of Egypt.

Coming from the development field, I am aware of the trend and many efforts that have been backed by different donor agencies to support the issuing of national ID for rural women in different governorates in Upper Egypt. Thus, I enquired about the possibility that young women could benefit from this trend. Women reported numerous difficulties in obtaining national ID through this avenue. Rasha, a 24-year-old married women from Hope Village with a high school degree, said:

> Through my participation in *Neqdar Nesharek*, I got to know the magnitude of the problem of women without ID in my village. After I saw an announcement by the National Council for Women about issuing ID free of charge for poor women in rural villages, I voluntary convinced 15 women from my friends to come with me to the local branch of the National Council for Women in Fayoum to apply for ID…I arranged with my husband for a transportation and women collectively contributed in paying the driver to give us a round trip to the center [downtown Fayoum] to apply for IDs. But they refused to accept any of the 15 applications and when I wanted to understand the reason for their rejection and by investigating what should we do, the guy in the office shouted at me 'we will detain you if you come here anymore'… so I took the women and went back home.

When I teasingly asked Rasha if she gave up after this encounter, she answered gloomily, "What should I do?" I recorded a note about the incident that she had just shared in my reflective journal with the hope that I would have a chance to investigate the issue further. Later that evening, I emailed the president of the National Council for Women in the central office in Cairo to arrange for an interview with her as part of my

research. My previous work relationship with her before the Egyptian President appointed her as president of the NCW facilitated my request for a meeting. In my meeting with her in her office in Cairo in December 2016, I told her about Rasha's incident with the NCW branch in Fayoum. She did not deny Rasha's tale, but justified the officials' rejection of the women's requests, attributing it to a recent policy that was enforced by the NCW board of trustees. She explained that the policy—that women in groups would not be provided with free IDs— was a reaction to what she called "efforts of Islamists to exploit the massive number of illiterate rural women's by abusing their IDs to interfere in public elections and other public decisions." She then said if women go on their own to apply for ID, not in a group, they would receive the service and get their free IDs.

The rationale given by the NCW president seems to correspond to what Rasha stated earlier—that government officials mistakenly associate all veiled women with the prohibited Muslim Brotherhood organization and, therefore, treat them harshly. On the other hand, this rhetoric is in line with Abu-Lughod's (2010) contention that women's rights organizations play a superficial, nominal role in the empowerment of women; they only benefit elite women in metropolitan areas, and only do so when the focus of salient organizations that are supported by the regime (e.g., NCW as a quasi-government organization) is not to promote demand-making policies, or enhance women's civic engagement in any way. Rather, as argued by Albrecht (2013), they are 'window dressing' organizations co-opted by the authoritarian regime as an instrument to reduce

the pressure from the West and from international organizations for gender equality and democratization.

The preceding discussion highlights various realities that contribute to the exclusion of women from state civic activities, as experienced by women in rural villages in Fayoum. The women also narrated several other issues that impede their participation in what they call "*mashakel karietna*" ('problems of our village'). While participation in local civic activities may not require state documents as a prerequisite, young women reported three other major issues that limit their involvement in their local communities: oppressive social norms, economic dependency, and limited mobility.

First, oppressive social norms represent a major obstacle to civic engagement for young women in rural Fayoum. In contrast to the literature reviewed in chapter 2 of this dissertation, the interview data suggested that women experienced oppression before and after marriage. While Ramadan (2012) argued that marriage, being a primary marker of adulthood, is one of the most important social events in the lives of young people in authoritarian and patriarchal societies like Egypt and is a key to participation in public life with less family supervision, young women reported that they face many gender expectations that limit their role before and after marriage. Gender expectations of women in Egypt, as argued by El Saadawi (2007), include the expectation that women should remain at home until they marry, adhere to male superiority, and be responsible for all household activities. These practices contribute to the general perception that a society, especially a rural society, is patriarchal, extensively dominated by males, and oppressive towards women. Throughout the interviews, women recounted several issues

which they believe contribute to social oppression, including the subjugation of women, social conservatism, hegemonic male culture, and cultural backwardness; they repeatedly referred to these issues as constraints that limit their participation in public life that men do not face. The data suggested that young women in rural Fayoum are expected to conform to these social norms and accept male superiority regardless of age. Women explained that, in so-called patriarchal societies, the most powerful family member is the father and his power extends to the male siblings, uncles, and male cousins. The clear majority of women whom I interviewed through this study were married at an early age and early marriage as one consequence of these four issues of oppression was a recurrent theme in the interviews with women. Amina, a 25-year-old married women from Dream Village, explained how early marriage could be considered the root of many of the problems that women in rural Fayoum face, but distinguished between "victim women", as she termed them, and "matriarchs":

> I mistakenly thought that I would be free when I marry. Before I get married, I was not allowed to go out of the village alone, I never had a chance to enjoy the life or the humble amount of money I earned by working on sewing as I was not allowed to touch this money and save them for my marriage. I was engaged at 15 and then married at age of 17 years. Now, I have four daughters, I help my husband in his poultry small business most of the time, do the non-ending household activities, and I am rearing the four kids. My life, as all those women, has completely changed after marriage but not for good. I moved from my parent's control to my mother-in-law oppression. She is a woman, but she controls everyone at home: my husband and I, my brothers-in-law and their wives, and all her grandsons and granddaughters. She manages every aspect in the life of everyone stays at home. She is a matriarch; my husband and his six

> brothers along with their all elder children who work and make money hand their entire income to her where she is in charge for spending for everything in the house. She is very good in that; she knows how to keep the home stable all the time, but she is tough. When she is away, in few cases, she delegates my eldest brother-in-law's wife to administer the entire home while she is away. If the wife of my eldest brother-in-law is also away with her, she delegates the second eldest brother-in-law's wife. Living with my husband's family is not easy; too many household responsibilities and a lot of problems. One of the problems, for example, was when I participated with *Neqdar Nesharek* and I got a small loan to start an at-home poultry livestock microenterprise. Because I started to go out to buy poultry and fodder from the market, my brothers-in-law's wives got jealous at me and groused to my mother-in-law not to let me go out of home and contribute in the household activities instead. Fortunately, my husband earnestly begged her to let me participate with *Neqdar Nesharek*; and because he is the youngest she welcomed his request.

Amina's story is particularly illuminating as it demonstrated the oppression she experiences living with her husband's extended family and lends support to Mahmood's (2011) call for dismantling the institution of the nuclear and extended family as a key source of women's oppression in rural Arab societies. Amina also highlighted the ways that young women suffer when trying to make money for their marriage at young age. Like Amina, several other women mentioned that the jealousy of other women from within the extended family or neighborhood over their public activities leads to other problems with their mothers-in-law and husbands, and accordingly affects their participation in public life.

The social norms described above are not solely a product of the local culture but are also intertwined with the lack of economic opportunities in Fayoum. Women claimed

that young men who legally and illegally migrate to work in the neighboring countries bring in other social norms from other countries in the Middle East region and Europe. One such social norm is gender roles. Both Warda and Nahla expressed that their husband's migration to work abroad had an influence gender roles within their marriages. Warda, a 21-year-old from Hope Village, married her cousin and has a baby girl. Warda lives with her mother-in-law along with her sisters-in-law. Before they were married, Warda's husband worked in Italy for about three years. Warda described him as "a nice man" because he treats her nicely and helps her in things that she believes "no other man in Fayoum does." Warda said that he was the one who picked out the three-piece outfit that she was wearing during the interview— a long white and dark blue dress; an embroidered light blue blouse with a collar, buttons, and long sleeves; and a simple off-white veil. Her outfit stood out from the other young women I interviewed in the three villages. In public, most women usually wear a long loose black cloak with black *niqab* or dark *khemar*—a long veil that covers the head and entire torso, including the two arms. I asked Warda if her attire was typical attire for her sisters-in-law, as well, to which she responded:

> My mother-in-law and all my brothers-in-law's wives do not like the way I dress and they say I became a *Cairene*. They wanted me dress normal and they asked me several times to change the way I dress but Gamal [her husband] always says *inshallah* [god willing]. They also do not like that my husband and I go to watch a movie in the cinema in Fayoum every once in a while. But my mother-in-law always overwhelms me with additional household tasks to keep me at home for weeks every time we go watch a movie to punish me. My husband also faces a lot of problems because of me; when I came here and joined the project [*Neqdar*

> *Nesharek*], his mother and all his brothers were mad at him and they still give him hard time because I went with Rasha and other women to meet the chairman of the local council last year to complain the lack of bird flu vaccine. I remembered at that time I heard his brothers yelling at him saying 'you are not a man', but I have to admit he never changed and he never treated me as his brothers treat their wives.

In Warda's experience, the impact of European culture on her husband influenced his attitude toward gender roles. In addition to the several incidents that Warda has explicitly mentioned, including the way her husband helps her in tasks that are socially constructed as women's responsibilities, Gamal's liberal attitude was manifested not only in that he picked Warda's outfit but also in letting her wear attire that was different than the rest of other women in her village. I later asked Warda to ask if I could meet with her husband, and was able to meet with him as one of my six interviews with parents and husbands.

Nahla, a 24-year-old woman from Bright village, has had a very different experience with her husband who worked as a farmer for two years in Libya. Nahla is also married to her cousin and has five children, and like Warda, Nahla lives with her mother-in-law. When her husband returned from Libya, he put all his saving into establishing a small grocery shop—a room he built annexed to the house where they live. Nahla explained how this tough livelihood limits her involvement in public life in her society. As she explains below, while rearing five kids is not an easy task, it is not the only problem:

> I open the grocery shop every day from morning to dusk time and because there is a small door connecting the shop with the house I take care of the five kids and do other household tasks while running the grocery shop. I go to the wholesaler in the city center once a week to get more goods for the shop. My husband stays at home all day and comes to the shop by dusk time to gather with a group of his friends in front of the shop play cards, chat, drink tea, and smoke hookahs until we close late evening. While he is in the shop with his friends, I keep serving them tea and prepare the hookahs. It is too much work for me and the income of the shop is not enough for all of us. When I ask him to go work as he used to or help me in the too many things I do, he beats me.

The two stories of Warda and Nahla show that the immigration of husbands to work and live abroad may bring new behaviors and attitudes, either negative or positive, to their villages. While Warda's husband brought a more liberal attitude toward gender roles that challenged the socially constructed gender roles in his village, Nahla's husband brought a negative attitude in relation to work, values, and gender roles. The attitudes of the two husbands may conform to the theory of Brooks and Bolzendahl (2004) on the link between contextual and ideological learning and changing gender role attitudes. Brooks and Bolzendahl's study examined the effects of context on adult attitude change to opinion trends and contended that gender role attitudes appear to have significant effects within the context of family institutions. Finally, migration of husbands because of limited economic opportunities in Fayoum has negatively affected these women's mobility, and accordingly their participation. The women disclosed that they are not allowed by their in laws to spend much time on unnecessary affairs while their husbands are traveling to work outside Fayoum.

The second major issue that limits women's involvement in the everyday life of their local communities is the burdens of limited economic opportunities and accordingly economic dependency. As women recounted earlier, women are not only expected to carry out all household activities and the rearing of children, but also are often expected to contribute to breadwinning activities, as was the case for Nahla, who spends more than eight hours daily in her husband's grocery shop, which is the main source of income for her family.

Additionally, financial burdens on young women, especially the high cost of marriage, turn marriage into a perplexing process. Although marriage may not be their choice, women expressed how this perplexing process puts them between the hammer and the anvil. First, young women must work hard to accumulate the financial costs of marriage (furniture and furnishings, housing, and celebrations). Singerman (2007) asserts that, marriage cost in rural Egypt averaged four and a half times the gross national product (GNP) per capita and fifteen times the annual household expenditure per capita. The situation becomes even tougher for less educated young women. Furthermore, young women feel pressure as a result of the social construction of girl imperative marriage in rural societies where it is considered "too late" for a girl if she is not married by the age of twenty. Sabah, a 19-year-old married woman from Bright village, said "I feared that I become *aness* [spinster] if I wouldn't marry before the age of 20 years." During this "liminal state", as coined by Singerman, young women remain financially dependent on their families who finance a large part of the cost of their marriage. This is consistent with the earlier tale told by Nadia, the mother of Nayera, a former participant of *Neqdar*

Nesharek from Bright village, who stated that the reason that Nadia let her daughter Nayera participates in *Neqdar Nesharek* was so that she could contribute to the marriage cost. She added, "I wanted Nayera to join the program to learn or get a small loan to run a small business from home to pay for her *gihaz* [sets of home furnishings] so she could marry."

The burden of marriage cost and the social pressure of girl imperative marriage in rural societies have tremendous consequences on the quality and quantity of the civic participation of young women. In many cases, young women are left with no spare time to participate in unpaid public activities, as they are under pressure to save all of their earnings for more than five years to accumulate enough to pay for their marriage together with their parents. Because adolescents are economically dependent on parents and are not considered to be adults until they enter into marriage, they must live by the rules and morality of their parents and the dominant values of their society (Singerman, 2007). Nayera, a 24-year-old married woman with four children from Bright Village, put it clearly:

> How could I spend any time away while I was immersed in household activities and working for 15 pounds per day in different farms in the village to save for my marriage. It is absolutely shame to go have fun like other girls while my mother cuts part of her humble pension and work hard along with my two male siblings to accumulate the costs of my marriage. I wouldn't do that, and if I could, everyone would blame me and I would be dismissed by my society…and now I have four kids and I work to help my husband in raising these kids. My mother-in-law can throw me out if I do so.

While this deteriorated situation leaves some women with no time to participate in any civic activities, it encourages other young women to participate in various paid political and civic activities. Similar to Iman who voted for a particular candidate in one of the public elections in exchange for 20 pounds, one kilo of sugar, and a bottle of cooking oil, Omaima and Doreya, two young women from Bright Village, participated in election observation on behalf of a female candidate in the last parliamentary elections in Egypt because they were under the impression that they would receive some form of compensation or personal benefit. Omaima is married with one child, and Doreya is a widow with two children. The two women, along with another married woman named Nevine, participated in the election observation representing the female candidate who was running for one of the seats reserved for women within the Fayoum governorate. Omaima participated with the hope that she would get a financial per diem allowance and that the elected candidate would help her find a job if she won the election. Doreya also was hoping to get two things out of her participation in the observation:

> I was so happy when I heard from her [the candidate's] team that I was selected to represent her and observe the day-long election in the elementary school in my village. My husband died in accident last year and the folks at the social insurance office in Fayoum refused to help us in getting any indemnity or pension because he did not have national ID…One of my neighbors said that my two children and I are eligible to receive an exceptional pension from the Ministry of Social Solidarity, but I was never able to submit my application because of the complicated government bureaucracy. So, I was hoping she would help me apply for the exceptional pension to raise the two children…On the election day, I left my two kids with my neighbor so she takes care of them while I was away at the school observing the election. But all what we got at the end of the day was a

> meal and a soft drink. When my colleague—Omaima, asked about financial per diem allowance, the candidate's team told her it is volunteer work. I felt bad spending the whole day away from my children without any benefit; if I knew that, I would not have done it ever.

While these three cases— Iman voting and Omaima and Doreya observing the election— represent two of the most salient forms of civic engagement, especially in liberal democracies (Adler & Goggin, 2005), the personal benefit motives of the three women may have affected the quality of their civic engagement. The desire to benefit others and willingness to volunteer one's time and energy to do so are important components in distinguishing between private or public involvement for personal gain and the civic engagement "in which citizens participate in the public life of a community in order to improve conditions for others" (Adler & Goggin, 2005 p. 236). In the case of these women, their involvement did not produce any change in attitude that might drive them to maintain future engagement and would thus be considered ineffective civic engagement according to Gastil and Levine's (2005) criteria. Furthermore, the example above may also show the complication of participating in civic life when one's basic needs are also not met (e.g. opportunities for work are limited). The idea of volunteering is inconceivable to those who need to work to survive.

Finally, the above discussion do not show any differences between those who participated in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program and those who didn't regarding the constraining discourses. However, participation in the program may helped those who participated to realize the constraints and figure solution. Rasha, who is a former *Neqdar Nesharek* participant, recounted earlier how her participation in the program facilitated

her realization of the ID problem as one of the constraints by saying "Through my participation in *Neqdar Nesharek*, I got to know the magnitude of the problem of women without ID in my village."

Encouraging discourses

Despite the numerous constraints and social pressures that blur the growing role they play in public life of their society, young women recounted number of encouraging discourses. These discourses, according to young women, encourage civic engagement and offer more positive experiences for them. Therefore, young women are becoming more skilled and educated than ever before, and many are contributing to and involving themselves in the everyday politics of their society. The data suggests that women are utilizing several resources to increase their learning and their involvement, to develop their agency, and to gain the recognition of their families and society. One example, as explained by Amira, is the various development programs that aim to empower less-advantaged women in rural Fayoum, such as *Neqdar Nesharek*. These initiatives include literacy classes, women's reproductive health activities, entrepreneurial skill programs, poverty reduction programs, and rural development projects. In addition, young women recounted the uniqueness of unconventional resources where they were able to arrange their learning and social practices based on their needs, traditions, and lifestyles. Although such development programs may not be education oriented activities or a substitute to schooling, young women find ways to benefit from them by obtaining the knowledge and skills that they need to gain recognition from their families and society. The accounts of these women conform with the contention of Robinson-Pants (2016) that

traditional education may not provide many less-advantaged rural young women with essential skills and knowledge, as "schooling plays a relatively minor role…[and] is valued as a means to pave the way for employment in the formal sector, and to develop their social status and image" (p. 8).

The focus of this section, however, is not on the development programs per se, but rather on what young women enjoyed as a byproduct benefit of participating in those programs: "the opportunity to get out of the house." Like several other young women, Amira, a 20-year-old married woman with one child from Hope Village, disclosed her interest in this byproduct of the *Neqdar Nesharek* program (i.e., women's groups), and expressed that spending time and forming relationships outside of the home was, in fact, of greater interest to her than the entrepreneurial skills that were directly provided by the program:

> The best thing I highly valued through participating in *Neqdar Nesharek* was the opportunity to get out of the house and meet and talk with other women. Since my family stopped me from going to school at grade six, I rarely have a chance to leave the house and escape the too much household responsibilities. I was missing talking to people and listen to their stories. Yes, I was able to buy a sewing machine after my participation with the program as my family hoped, but it did not last long as people were not interested in paying the same amount of money for the same Chinese garment that they can get from any boutique. But my good relationship with that group of women I met during my participation in the program is still exist despite we all got married and have children. We all like to come together until today because we feel stronger together…it is a good feeling that we did not have before our group was existed. We all take care of each other and every woman feels confident within the group. Our husbands know that we

> still meet and they have no problem with that. If I would not participate in the *Neqdar Nesharek*, we wouldn't get to know each other and I wouldn't have the chance to go out of the house. I learn too many things from other women…we don't only talk about rearing kids; we talk about everything: cooking, health, makeup, religion, and others. I was always bad in making bakery, but Zainab taught me how to make cake and other sweet recipes. I also showed them how to make a curtain at home and how to easy draw and sewing embroidery on the curtains. I hope you can help us with other programs like *Neqdar Nesharek*. I told them during the evaluation of the project upon its completion that we would love to have an extension and more activities of *Neqdar Nesharek* but they never return back to us.

Although Amira explained that the decision to join the *Neqdar Nesharek* program was not hers, she asked for more activities because she has benefitted from the byproduct of these activities—the opportunity to get together with other women. While the direct effect of the program no longer exists, Amira showed how informal women's groups, the byproduct of *Neqdar Nesharek*, are self-sustained, and its positive effects continue to spillover to all its members. In a study of typical adult literacy programs for rural women in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, Rogers (2000) observed a similar phenomenon, namely, that women were motivated to attend literacy programs because of the groups they form together as a byproduct of those literacy programs. Rogers explains:

> Participants like the discussions which open their minds to new things. They value the opportunity to get out of the house, to meet with others, to talk about community happenings and concerns. They feel a sense of solidarity which was lacking before the group existed. They feel more confident and independent. And these groups often lead on to some other form of activity…For example, a women's group in Bangladesh, engaged in a campaign about violence against

> women, learned to read and use several legal texts simply because they were very concerned about this issue; and in India, a residents' group in Madras (Chennai) learned to cope with literacy activities related to council matters and in the process the literacy skills of the members of the group were enhanced (pp. 237-239).

Another encouraging aspect introduced by women in relation to their role in public life was the social capital that they were able to benefit and accumulate within their social networks. Although social capital is neither a widely used term among ordinary people nor among Arab scholars, women tacitly referred to social capital as they narrated their everyday experiences. Amira's tale above shows how social capital is a product of women's social interactions. Without becoming a member of the women's group, however, Amira and other young women would not have a chance to benefit from the social capital of others within the group. In addition, the accumulation of social capital requires that a group (social structure) be formed in the first place, according to Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000). Social capital, as argued by Coleman and Putnam, inheres in the structure of relationships between members of a network, and the desired social outcomes are achieved through their interactions.

I was struck by the fact that a great deal of learning was occurring within the women's group, yet it went largely unrecognized. Women's views on learning were mainly formed through their experiences with learning in formal settings, usually school, or non-formal settings like their experience in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program. Although the data suggested that informal learning plays an important role in the lives of women, as they engaged in informal learning in many aspects of their everyday lives, informal

learning was not at first recognized by the women as learning. One reason for this was the difficulty women experienced in making a connection between social capital and their learning. Through her narratives, Amira implicitly communicated that the reciprocal learning that took place between her and other women in her women's group was supported by their view of trust as "the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms" (Fukuyama, 2002, p. 27). As Amira benefited from the human capital of Zainab, she was also willing to share her own skills, which was demonstrated by the fact that she taught Zainab and other members of her group "how to make a curtain at home and how to easy draw and sewing embroidery on the curtains." In the same vein, Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) make a connection between social structure (women's group), social interaction, and learning, asserting that "any notion of learning presupposes interactions between the social actors themselves and the contextual tools they employ" (p. 5).

Women recounted several experiences in which their social capital facilitated participation in the public life of their society, various aspects involved with earning a livelihood, as well as their participation in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program. For example, earlier in this chapter, Doreya from Bright village mentioned that she left her two kids with her neighbor to be taken care of while she was away at the school observing the election. Her neighbor's care of her children, which is a form of social capital, facilitated her participation in election observation for the parliamentary elections on behalf of a female candidate in Fayoum. In the same tale, she also described another situation in which she benefited from the human capital of a neighbor who works for the local

municipality office in Fayoum and has some knowledge pertaining to social insurance procedures. She explained, "My neighbors said that my two children and I are eligible to receive an exceptional pension from the Ministry of Social Solidarity." Although social capital as a relatively new concept may not be part of the everyday language of rural communities, Pratt (1996) argued that the concept of social capital exists in rural communities and is part of many rural discourses. Like Amira and Doreya, women referred to social capital numerous times throughout the interviews without terming it as such; they identify resources in situations in which interactions draw on internal and external resources.

Sabreen, a 23-year-old married woman with two children from Bright Village, demonstrated another example of social capital and women's agency. Sabreen shared how the emancipatory and supportive nature of women's group allowed her to become aware that she is an agent of power, capable of deconstructing the dominant power relations and discriminatory social constructions within families and society that influence many rural discourses and reconstructing society in a way that she sees as fair. This increased sense of self-efficacy that Sabreen describes is largely the product of the sharing and accumulating of social capital that occurs within women's group. By sharing their knowledge free of charge among themselves, Sabreen and the women in her network increased their sense of solidarity and their self-efficacy. Sabreen's tale about her inheritance shows her increasing sense of agency:

> It is common here women do not receive their inheritance and stay dependent on their husbands or brothers. When my father passed-away, about a year after I got

> married, my older brother refused to give me and my sister our portion of our father's inheritance. He said girls cannot take our land and give it to strangers [husbands]. Neither my sister nor I could do anything. But later when I learned from my peer women that it [inheritance] is our legal right not a gift from my brother, and when I felt I am capable, I decided to sue my brother in the court. One of the women told me that it is my right according to the Quran and showed me the verse that indicates this right. I decided to go to the House of Fatwa [government institution for ruling of Islamic law and legal research], and I did get a written official opinion from them that I used in supporting my legal case. It took me long time, and effort and a lot of people did not like what I did even my sister; but I won the case at the end and I received my inheritance.

Sabreen's experience maybe consistent with the notion of human agency is fundamentally associated with freedom and determinism. Furthermore, the agency that she demonstrates is one of different mechanisms asserted by Bandura (1989) to exercise agency where "people's beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives…[where] much human behavior is regulated by forethought embodying cognized goals, and personal goal setting is influenced by self-appraisal of capabilities" (p. 1175). Sabreen's story also shows the important role of social capital in extending the benefit of the human capital of the group to its individual members. Finally, Amira, Doreya, and Sabreen's tales demonstrate the crucial role of conversation (social interactions) within the context of social structure (women's group) where interactions draw on internal and external resources available to the members of the

social group. Women's groups that were produced as a byproduct of *Neqdar Nesharek*, however, are not the only social networks available for women in the three villages. Women reported several types of women's groups that women use to gather, interact, produce social capital, and learn. In the coming chapter, I discuss these informal groups in detail.

In rural communities, Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) contend that "learning interactions may result in "good' or 'bad' outcomes for some groups of people, or 'developmental' and 'destructive'" outcomes for other groups" (p. 9). Falk and Kilpatrick argued that the micro interaction processes that take place within women's groups have the capacity to link with the wider social, civic and economic outcomes of the society. These learning interactions may also create connections between encouraging and discouraging discourses in rural societies. For example, while learning is usually considered a positive change, learning from action may contribute to a negative discourse about women in patriarchal societies, as was the case in rural Fayoum. In later sections, I discuss how the development of Saleema's role in society was not well received within her conservative male dominant society in her Hope village, and led her husband to divorce her as a form of punishment for her new civic role.

In the successive chapters, I demonstrate, through the explanations given by my participants, the way women's groups serve as learning avenues where they learn to live, to participate, and to gain recognition from their families and society in ways that go beyond the conventional sense of participation.

Summary

Women recounts in the preceding discussion shows how participants of this study understand the social and political issues that impact their lives and identities within their communities. The narratives highlight the tensions between discourses created and perpetuated by women and other discourses related to women's roles in rural communities. It is suggested that the "invisible", or to be clear, the unrecognized role of rural young women does not indicate weak participation but rather reflects a social construction of women's identities. It also reflects a methodological failure of quantitative research to penetrate women's realities and capture their unique forms of participation. The data also suggests that, despite the undoubtable importance of development programs targeting women's development and education (e.g., *Neqdar Nesharek*), education alone did not necessarily lead to an enhancement in social position for the women who participated in this study. These women demonstrate how they informally learn and teach each other in a more appropriate context where they can construct the meaning of their own learning and advance their social position. Finally, the chapter did not find significant differences of the narratives between young women who are former participants of the *Neqdar Nesharek* program and those who didn't attend the *Neqdar Nesharek*. However, a minor difference was found regarding the constraining discourses. This difference may indicate that participation in the program may helped those who participated to realize the constraints and figure solution. The next chapter discusses women's groups as learning avenues and pathways for civic engagement to show how women utilize those avenues and how learning occurs.

Chapter Five: Avenues of learning

Pedagogical pathways to civic and political participation

This chapter discusses how young women utilize their self-created women groups as unconventional avenues to generate social capital and acquire civic knowledge and skills required for civic engagement. The chapter is set to answer the second research question: how young women understand their experiences of their self-created women groups in relation to their civic learning. In doing so, I divided the chapter into four sections. First section provides an account of four examples of women's self-created groups used by young women in the three villages in Fayoum. The second section provides detailed discussion on how young women utilize these unconventional avenues to generate social capital and to learn about civic and life skills. The third section is devoted to discussing the relations between women's self-created informal groups, life skills, and civic action as narrated by women. The last section, concludes the chapter with an account on how the young women in this study participate in and continue to learn from their civic action. Finally, this chapter aims to explain the connection and the distinction between the informal civic learning that spontaneously occurs within these unconventional avenues and the formal civic education provided by the state. through formal schooling.

Introduction

Young women learn about civics informally through their social interactions as they converse and interact in their women's groups. Throughout the interviews, women explained that they learned to participate in civic activities not only from their

interactions within women's groups, but also through their civic action. This learning process does not imitate the linear structure of traditional teaching of content, nor does it rely on its three main components (i.e. curriculum, teacher, student; Rubin, 1969); rather, it is a social process through which young women construct their own knowledge and learn through interaction and experience.

Data, discussed below, suggested that experience and conversation are central to young women's civic learning where they create meaning and construct knowledge from the real activities of their everyday lives. From this perspective, women's groups might be understood as places of relationships and interactions, and as such, are sites of authentic and informal learning. Traditional theories of learning posit that knowledge emerges from abstract and out-of-context experiences; however, women's groups, as specific, contextualized spaces, are places where young women can tap into their prior knowledge and experiences to challenge the social injustice of their societies.

Young women recounted that, the informal civic learning that occurs through spontaneous discussions as young women interact when they meet in their self-created women's groups differs from the formal top-down civic education provided by school. An important distinction made by women is that their informal civic learning generated through spontaneous discussions facilitates their public engagement, collective action, and leads to effective practice of citizenship. But formal civic education fails to promote civic engagement and to reach to young people. As discussed in Chapter 1, this failure is due to the weak role of the overburdened public education sector in preparing students, especially female students, to engage in their society. El Baradei (2015) relates this to

ineffective instructional methods and Ginsburg and Megahed (2008) refer to culture of school that may be favorable to boys not the same for girls and the limited time allocated to civic education as a subject that has been downgraded to secondary importance compared to other subjects such as science and math.

In the remaining of this chapter I discuss what young women recounted as self-created women's groups by sharing an account of some forms of women's informal groups. Then I introduce how young women utilize these unconventional avenues to learn about civic and life skills; and conclude the chapter with an account on how the young women in this study participate in and learn from civic action.

Individually constructed women's groups

Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned several forms of volunteer groups that allowed for gathering outside the home and time to chat, interact, and have fun. Most women, including those I interviewed as non-participants, referred to the *Neqdar Nesharek* program as a means for women to come together in the first place. Former participants of *Neqdar Nesharek* explained that they formed their first group (social network) as a byproduct of their participation in the program. Other non-participants of *Neqdar Nesharek* spoke of the program in terms that suggested that it overlapped and intersected with their own self-created women's groups. In these self-created groups, women typically talk about problems encountered in their daily lives that are of importance to them, including: their marriage, family planning, child rearing, community concerns, clothing, and makeup. Women also spoke of their thirst for more information outside the confines of their home sphere. In the following section, I briefly

describe four examples of the self-created women's groups that operate without direct facilitation from *Neqdar Nesharek*.

Women baking together is a weekly, self-created event where women come together as a group to chat, interact, and banter while baking. Like most rural communities, Hope, Dream, and Bright villages are places where families bake their own bread, an essential component to all meals for most people. In communities where the average household size is 35 and can include extended family members such as grandparents, grandchildren, sons, daughters, and in-laws living under the same roof, baking at home substantially reduces the cost of living. Baking for 35 people is exclusively part of women's responsibilities, and it is a time consuming, all-day task that requires more than one person to complete. Every home in rural communities has a traditional oven, a *forn*, (an Arabic term for a clay kiln of solid construction that is fueled by agricultural and livestock waste). The *forn* is usually located in either the main lobby or an extension to the house, and preparing it for use is a long process. Because of these complexities, rural women developed a tradition of baking together in rotation so they can help each other and reduce the length of the preparation process. During the interviews, participants explained that 7 to 9 women usually bake together at a time. While the *forn* is heating, women have ample time to alternate tasks as they prepare the dough and wait for its fermentation. Participants stated that this time allowed for talk, interaction, and learning from each other.

Peanut picking and separation is another event in rural societies that is associated with women. Peanuts are one of the crops cultivated in the Hope, Dream, and

Bright villages. As in many developing countries, agriculture in these villages is still mainly labor intensive and rarely mechanized. After men uproot the peanut plant from the soil and place it in big piles, women come together to separate the nut from the root of the plant. Women spend most of the day sitting in circles around these piles, separating the peanut from its plant, conversing and sharing stories with each other. Participants disclosed in their interviews that this event represents another opportunity for them to get out of the home, meet other women, and spontaneously learn from each other. Women explained that the peanut harvest is one of many agricultural events in which they gather and experience these same effects.

Halaqa, or "circle" in Arabic, is another form of self-created group where women come together to recite and memorize the Quran. Within the *halaqa*, women sit in a circle to teach each other the proper recitation of the Quran. Women do not have to be literate to join these groups, as those who cannot read memorize the Quran by listening to others. The *halaqa* takes place at a member's home, or it can also be organized by religious- or development-oriented NGOs for a small fee. Like bread baking, the peanut harvest, and other forms of self-created groups, the *halaqa* is a place where women discuss many other topics, including the organization of potlucks. In their interviews, women explained that this kind of gathering is extremely welcomed and supported by their families.

Sardine gathering is another self-created group where women come together to eat sardines. Egyptians, especially those living in rural communities, use the term "sardine" to refer to one way of eating preserved fish. Similar to the Swedish concept *surströmming*, sardine refers to any fish that has been fermented by adding salt to prevent

rotting. In Egypt, sardines are usually accompanied by green onions, and have been eaten during the Easter season for thousands of years. Former *Neqdar Nesharek* participants mentioned that sardine gathering, which regularly happened at one of the women's homes or farms, was one way they have maintained their social network since the phase-out of the program. Women ranked sardine gathering as the event with the highest turnout. Participants described this self-created group as a place where they had fun, played games, and talked about topics ranging from community happenings to health and makeup. Women explained that even though they may sometimes choose to replace sardines with another dish, they still maintained the term "sardine" to describe the gathering for all other dishes. Finally, in these groups, women share the cost of the meal, including: the main dish, dessert, fruit, drinks and *lib*–the Egyptian snack that is roughly the equivalent of sunflower seeds.

Rural women do not have the luxury of time, especially as they are frequently overwhelmed with seemingly unending household activities. The data suggested that young women used numerous strategies to ensure that their group meetings accomplished household activities while also allowing for highly desired time together to converse and learn. Women disclosed that this strategy is important for them not only because they can accomplish some work while chatting with each other, but also because it legitimizes the time they spend away from family. Some of those activities included crocheting clothes for their kids, preparing vegetables for same-day meals, putting on makeup, and preparing vegetables to dry and preserve for later use (e.g. cleaning and trimming okra to string on a rope for drying under the sun for later use).

Avenues of learning

The data suggested that women's peer group activities such as conversation, storytelling, and deliberation served as a pedagogical pathway, or avenue of learning. While most women appeared to be unaware of the learning that happens through social interactions, they were able to notice and report on it when I asked for their reflections. For example, one of the women, Ola, said, "I just realized when you asked what I learned from that event, that I incidentally learned a lot from my peers as we spontaneously conversed." As Lave and Wenger (1991) note, spontaneous conversations represent a form of cognitive apprenticeship where women rotate between the roles of master and apprentice. Women described their interactions within the network as a flat, horizontal (as opposed to vertical, top-down) relationship. These horizontal social interactions foster learning among women because it creates a power dynamic where women can learn and teach each other as both "masters" and "apprentices." These horizontal relationships resemble Lave and Wenger's emphasis on the crucial role of conversation; in other words, the peer-based conversations between women allowed for discussions about their everyday lives and also served as an invitation for dialog on topics like civic and public affairs. The concept of horizontal relationships provides insight into how the women process, learn, and understand civic skills. Literature about informal learning highlights the role of conversation in learning skills and behaviors (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Baker, Jensen and Kolb (2002) add a dialectical dimension by claiming that, "conversation is a meaning-making process whereby understanding is achieved through interplay of opposites and contradictions" (p. 53). In addition, Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development theory (ZPD) maintains that conversation, as both activity and the context

for learning, is the basis for the negotiation, participation, and transformation of external knowledge into internal processes. According to Vygotsky's ZPD theory, the young women learn as they come together, form a network, and engage in social interaction.

Throughout the interviews, the young women explained that participating in conversation within the network facilitated the evolution of their consciousness, which in turn increased their capacity for constructing meaning out of what they were doing. For example, Ola, a 20-year-old single woman from Hope village who happened to be illiterate (couldn't read or write basic sentences), explained how her full engagement in interaction with other women in her social network facilitated her civic learning:

> One day and while I was meeting with other women in our sardine group, we had to decide on what dish we would bring for the next meeting. I recommended a dish that I make really well, as all other women say, and there were two other recommendations by two other women, my peers. While we were deliberating which dish to bring next time, some said that they wanted my dish, but the rest were divided between the other two dishes. One of the women, who knows a lot because she is educated and finished high school, said we should vote for the dish for next time to solve this dilemma. Then she took a blank piece of paper from her daughter's notebook, cut it into small pieces, and distributed them to all of us, one each. Then she asked all of us to write down the dish that we wanted for next time, and she emphasized that we should each only write one dish. Because I cannot write, she whispered to me, asking about my favorite dish of the three. I chose mine, and she wrote it down on my paper and gave it back to me. After all women finished their choices, she collected the pieces of paper and read them loudly before she announced the winning dish that we will prepare for the next meeting. I learned about elections and voted for the first time in my life. And, guess what? I also won the voting as my recommended dish received the highest

> number of votes. I was so happy, not only because my dish won the election, but also because I learned and voted for the first time, and if I have an ID, I would go vote in the coming elections.

This quote from Ola shows how her incidental learning, as a byproduct of her spontaneous social interactions with peer women in the sardine group, provided a form of informal learning where the women's group served as an avenue of learning. Although Ola is illiterate, she was able to practice the mechanism of the election to express her opinion and understand the election process as a form of civic knowledge. Ola's experiences can also be explained through Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory, which argues that an important role of learning is played by legitimate peripheral participation. From this perspective, individuals indirectly learn a great deal from their legitimate position on the periphery, even if they are not taking part in a particular activity. Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) refer to this form of learning as a process of cognitive apprenticeship and enculturation where learners, like Ola, have the "chance to observe and practice *in situ* the behavior of members of a culture, people pick up relevant jargon, imitate behavior, and gradually start to act" (emphasis in the original, p. 34). In addition, Ola's narratives highlights the key role of social capital generated within women's group. Women's interaction within the group (e.g. deliberate what meal to bring for their next meeting) facilitated the generation of social capital where one of them shared her knowledge about election with the rest of the members to use it free of charge. Sharing one's knowledge with other members of social network is what constitute the relation between social capital and human capital as discussed by Coleman (1988) in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. In sum, according to the young women of this study,

women's self-created groups, as avenues of learning, generate social capital and facilitate different forms of informal civic learning.

Data from the participants suggested that informal learning within their women's group might take different forms. Schugurensky (2000) developed a taxonomy that uses intentionality and consciousness as two main categories that identify three forms of informal learning (i.e. self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization). According to Schugurensky's taxonomy, Ola's learning about voting was unintentional, but conscious, because her learning experience occurred when she did not have any preconceived intention to learn about voting, rather, it was suggested by her peers through their social interactions. After the experience with peers in her sardine group, Ola became aware of and appreciated what she had learned incidentally about voting. Ola's experience resembles the conscious but intentional, learning and teaching that Amira narrated in the preceding chapter. As Amira stated:

> I was always bad at baking, but Zainab taught me how to make cake and other sweet recipes. I also showed them how to make a curtain at home and how to draw and sew embroidery on the curtains.

Unlike Ola, Amira's learning experience was: 1) *intentional* as she was self-directed to learn; 2) *purposeful* because she had the purpose of learning how to make cake and other sweet recipes before the process began; and, 3) *conscious* because she was aware that she had wanted to learn. The learning experience of intentionality, purpose, and consciousness also applied to the women that wanted to learn about making curtains at home. In addition, Ola's new attitude about participating in a public election (if she

would have obtained an ID) reflects another form of informal learning, *socialization* (Schugurensky, 2000).

In contrast to other social gatherings that young women may also partake in (e.g. family, school, religious groups in religious institutions, neighborhood gatherings), participants repeatedly explained that informal women's groups offered a safe space for them to talk freely, without prejudgment, and to learn from each other in an emancipatory context. When asked to explain why informal groups allowed different freedoms, some women explained that the heterogeneity and formality of those other groups, including those comprised of kin, produced a kind of psychological fear that they would not be able to defend their point of view when asked. Nabila, a 24-year-old who is married, has three children, from Dream village, and is a member of two informal women's groups explained these differences:

> We enjoy coming together, and we always look forward for the next time we will come together…we all respect each other and every one of us devotes herself to help other women, and we are always careful not to hurt anyone of us. This is why we have a lot of fun together, and this is why I love our sardine group more than the baking one. Not because in sardine group we have a lot of fun while, in the baking group, we exert a lot of effort from early morning until dusk. But because in the baking group, frankly, sometimes mothers-in-law join the group, and once they come, our conversation turns to a regular family routine talk that is usually dominated by mothers-in-law. We do not feel good while they are around because they criticize all of us on everything we say. So, to feel better, we stay silent when they join us. I remember one day when we came together to bake with Malak at her home, her mother-in-law joined us and kept insulting Malak several

> times in front of us. She ended up crying. We all decided not to bake at Malak's home anymore, but, of course, we still have Malak joins us every time we bake.

Nabila's narration of the tensions between safety and fear is related to Baker, Jensen and Kolb's (2002) argument that "when individuals are psychologically safe and secure, they are more likely to be asking questions, to be taking risks, and to be open to difference… conversational learning that embraces differences as a source of new understanding and questions previous assumptions and prejudices can be called deep learning" (pp. 2-3). In homogeneous women's groups with less age hierarchy, and through spontaneous conversations, women learn from each other about resources and opportunities available to them. These resources and opportunities include community resources that may provide opportunities for: civic engagement (e.g. women's club), governing resources (e.g. local council), and educational opportunities (e.g. entrepreneurial or first aid training). Zainab, Reda, and Mona's experiences demonstrate three examples of how conversation within women's groups facilitates hooking women up with community resources and educational opportunities. In the previous chapter, Zainab, a 24-year-old from Hope village who is married with three children, explained how she learned about local resources through spontaneous conversation with her peers, "I coincidently heard that there is women's club in the other village." As noted previously, although that women's club may not be accessible to Zainab, as it is located in the youth center which is widely known to be a male-youth facility, she appreciated that she came to learn about it only when she joined her women's group.

Reda, a 21-year-old from Hope village who is illiterate and married with one child, explained how she also became conscious of the local council (which governs several village-related affairs) through her social interaction with the women of her group:

> I pass by the local council of the village every day, and I never knew what it was all about until I learned about it as other girls were talking about it when we came together. I also learned that we [villagers] can elect one of us to represent the village in the council.

Although Reda did not join the conversation with a specific learning objective in mind, she realized that she had gained new knowledge and skills about the local council. This knowledge may allow her to participate more effectively in the democratic deliberation and decision-making process of her society. In addition, Reda acquired this knowledge at relatively little cost because her group allowed her to benefit from their accumulated human and social capital (Coleman, 1988). This politically relevant social capital, as indicated previously in the literature review section by Downs (1957) and Lake and Huckfeldt (1998), reduces the cost of participation by providing the civic knowledge and skills required to motivate civic engagement.

Mona, a 21-year-old from the Dream village who is married with two children, has differently benefited from her group. Unlike Zainab and Reda, Mona was able to receive an educational opportunity that later facilitated her career ambition and civic engagement. While I will discuss Mona's narrative and experiences more at length in the subsequent chapter, Mona's perspectives, as a confident and outspoken woman, are helpful to this discussion:

> What I wanted when I first joined the group was to get out of the house and to talk to someone and spend good time with my peers. One day, as we were talking together in the group, one of the women, whose brother works as a driver for the NGO in Fayoum, said that her brother told her that the NGO he works for would provide a two-day first aid workshop for educated girls who live in Fayoum. Because I finished my high school diploma, and I am a resident of Fayoum, I felt that was a good opportunity to go and learn, as I was pregnant in my first child at that time. I told the woman that I would like her to ask her brother if he could introduce me to the NGO to attend the workshop. I consulted my husband and he was happy that I could learn to take care of our expected baby. Because I cannot go on my own with a man in a car, my friend and her brother accompanied me to Fayoum to attend the workshop. She couldn't attend the workshop because she does not have a certificate to prove that she is educated, although she can read and write. Now, after I attended the workshop, I work as a paramedic three hours a day, twice a week, in Dr. Aly's [pseudonym] clinic on the main road to the village here.

Zainab, Reda, and Mona's examples show the role that conversation plays not only in providing knowledge and skills as a form of informal learning (that may facilitate civic engagement), but also in providing knowledge about economic, entrepreneurial or educational opportunities. These three examples of incidental learning are unintentional but conscious learning because women did not have the intention to learn but they became conscious about what they have learned after they learned about these resources.

While participant's discussions in informal groups tended to center around their marriage, children, and relationships with family, they also included attention to other shared community problems, possible solutions, and collective action. Several women in this study indicated that they were self-directed to learn about basic civics, and that their

learning was both intentional and conscious. Most women disclosed that they felt the need to learn some basic civics, and they did so by asking questions or intentionally involving themselves in discussion. Women reported that they were motivated to seek out civic knowledge because of the recent political and economic changes in Egypt. Participants noted a sense of obligation to know about these political and economic transformations in order to engage in the conversations happening with their peers inside the women's groups. For example, Nesma, an 18-year-old single woman from Hope village, mentioned that even though she was never interested in political topics, she had to acquaint herself with some basic knowledge in order to engage with her group. From her perspective, most of the discussion in her group over a certain period of time was focused on politics and the deteriorating situation in Fayoum. This is how Nesma related to politics. She also mentioned that by leaning about her rights and responsibilities as a citizen, she felt the need to obtain a national ID. Sadly, Nesma was never able to get an ID.

Most of women's learning in their self-created groups is unconscious even in the case of Nesma's. As was the case with most other women of the three villages, Nesma was self-directed to learn about basic civics. Although she approached this learning with intention and consciousness, her narrative demonstrates that part of her learning was unintentional where she indirectly internalized new values, behaviors, and attitudes from her everyday life with the women's group in a form of tacit socialization. Her learning experience is also a form of transformative learning, or "learning experiences that lead us

to challenge our assumptions and values and to radically change our existing prior knowledge and approaches" (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 6) as she narrated above.

While the narratives presented in the preceding discussion demonstrate the relationship between social interaction and learning about civic knowledge and skills, learning is not only explicit or restricted to civics. According to the women in this study, much of their learning is about a variety of life skills, or experiences that they either bring to the group or acquire through their interactions with each other. In the following chapters, I will explain how acquiring such seemingly "simple" life skills was seen by the participants as a catalyst through which women gained recognition and became civically engaged in their society.

The data suggests that the participants believe that the most powerful learning they experienced through their women's group and social interactions was the acquisition of life skills. They recounted how informal learning complemented their learning acquired through formal and non-formal education. As was the case with Amira's learning experience of making sweet dishes, several women in this study mentioned that their families appreciated when they learned new recipes and cooking techniques. For example, Doha, a 20-year-old from Dream village who is married with one child, disclosed how learning new cooking techniques and recipes affected her relationship with her family:

> Cooking a stuffed cabbage meal for an extended family was my nightmare when I got married to my husband. I was young when I first moved to live with my husband's family, and the rule was that every woman takes full responsibility to

> cook dinner for the whole family. Because we are six, without my mother-in-law, I have to cook a full meal once a week. No one, especially my mother-in-law, was happy with my cooking. I used to pray to God that I wouldn't ever have to cook stuffed cabbage when it was my turn. When Amina brought stuffed cabbage to the group one day, we all were amazed with how delicious it was. She gave us some tips about how to cook it this way. I personally asked her how she manages to do it for the whole family because she also lives with her mother-in-law. She gave me great tips not only for cooking but also for how to manage my time accomplishing such a huge meal. She even, kindly, invited me to help her the first time she cooked stuffed cabbage. Now my husband is happy that I mastered cooking the stuffed cabbage, not because he loves it, but because he was embarrassed every time his mother insulted me because of my cooking. I am really thankful to Amina because she did what my brothers-in-law's wives never cared for-- to teach me.

Learning to cook may not be new to most women in the three villages because it is part of their socially constructed gender roles. However, they learn and teach each other how to please families as a way to mitigate the harsh treatment they experience as a result of the discourses of social repression. These discourses affect women in rural communities where learning how to cook may lead to social recognition, community standing, and acclaim.

Another example of learning reported by participants is group deliberation and deliberative decision making. According to Gastil and Levine (2005), deliberation is an important form of democracy as it is central to decision making and consensus, or majority rule. Within their social network, the women in this study experienced face-to-face deliberation as a regular part of their everyday lives. Previously in this chapter, I

discussed Ola's story about how her group made decisions on which dish to bring for meetings. Ola's story is also a clear example of group deliberation. This example shows: 1) how the women's group has unwritten ground rules that help them share responsibilities in making decisions; 2) how women, as a group, looked at the problem from many points-of-view to explore possible solutions; and, 3) how they made a decision by applying and respecting the majority rule. The ability to make deliberative dialogue is an integral part of civic culture (Gastil & Levine, 2005). The examples from the participants that I have shared in this chapter show how their mastery and possession of communication skills relate to situated learning and becoming part of a community "learning to become a legitimate participant in a community involves learning how to talk and be silent in the manner of full participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 105). Effective communication is also an important civic skill required for effective civic engagement. In addition, the participants informally learn about deliberation, a skill that can be used in their everyday lives. The process of learning deliberation can be called informal because without the women's groups, many participants might not have intentionally sought out acquiring this skill. In this way, learning the skill of deliberation is a form of socialization because women have no prior intention of acquiring them and they are not aware that they have learned this skill (Schugurensky, 2000).

Unlike deliberation, which was learned in informal groups, the women in this study reported that critical thinking and problem solving were two skills they learned within the context of *Neqdar Nesharek*. Surprisingly, the non- *Neqdar Nesharek* participants whom I interviewed as part of this study also referred to *Neqdar Nesharek*

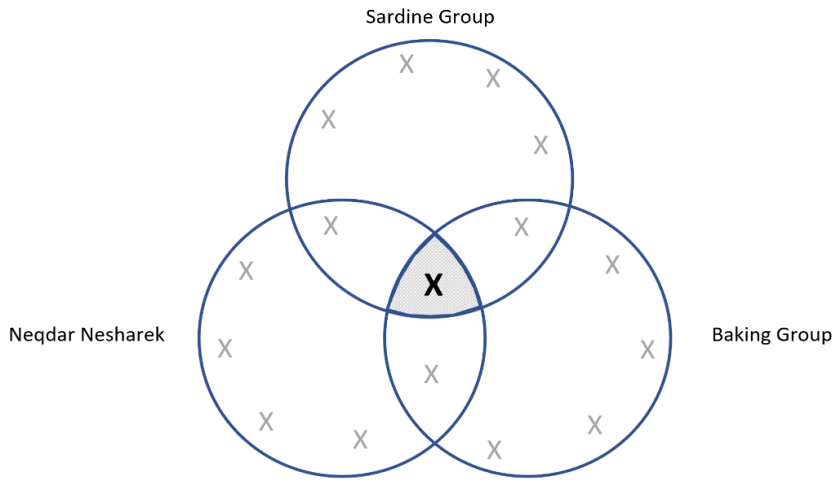
when they discussed their critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. For example, Soha, a 19-year-old single woman from Dream village, explained how she acquired critical-thinking and problem-solving skills from her peers who participated in the *Neqdar Nesharek*:

> Women here helped me in several things, and they saved my life, which would have been totally different by now. I still remember how Nabila helped me make the biggest decision in my life, when I had to decide on my marriage. My cousin wanted to marry me, and asked my father about it. But he is unemployed and illiterate. I am illiterate too. I left the school at grade two. I did not feel good about it when my mother told me that he asked to marry me. My sister is married to his older brother, and I see how bad her life has become. I kept delaying my response because I knew that my rejection would cause many troubles and tensions in my family, including my father, my uncle, and my sister, who already lives at their home. I was sad most of the time, and did not know what to do. But all women were affectionate and extremely supportive. Nabila asked me to calm down, and she offered to help me. She asked me to explain to her what exactly the problem was and why I felt that my decision would annoy my father, sister, and uncle. I informed her that my cousin was not a good marriage for me. He wants me because I am a cheap marriage for him. We are already one family, and he knows that I am accumulating a lot of my *gihaz* [sets of home furnishings]. My rejection would mean that my parents would have tense relationship with my uncle, and they fear that I will become a spinster. My sister would face hard times from her husband and her mother-in-law. My uncle may feel disrespected by my father when he informs him of my rejection. Then she agreed with me not to postpone it any more. I announced my rejection and solved that problem.

Nabila later said she applied the problem-solving techniques that she learned at *Neqdar Nesharek*. Soha and two other women from her sardine group mentioned that,

although they were new to the group, they observed how other women thought differently, asked critical questions, and analyzed the socially constructed power relations of their society. They explained how they benefited from Nabila's knowledge and skills, and they wished they could have participated in the *Neqdar Nesharek*. Soha's tale reveals three important issues. First, Soha recognizes that she benefits from Nabila's knowledge and skills, an example of how social capital can extend to the cumulative human capital and benefit of a group (Coleman, 1988). Second, Soha's description of Nabila, who is a member of three different women's groups, demonstrates how human capital can be extended and acquired between groups (i.e. *Neqdar Nesharek* and baking groups), even though the membership might not be the same. Soha's narrative highlights how Nabila's intersectional role between the three groups (as depicted in *Figure 5.1*) is consistent with Simmel's (1971) theory of intersecting social circles (as cited in Spykman, 1984).

Figure 5.1 – Group Intersection and Overlap



Simmel maintains that an individual in different social groups may play various social roles and personality aspects; however, while these roles tend to diverge from each other, this individual maintains the overlap and intersects between these social groups. Nabila was the only one in her sardine group who was also a member of the sustained women group that was created as a byproduct of women's participation in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program. Third, Soha's description of Nabila is an example of how situated learning operates in their group. The women learn tacitly, without a teacher, instructor, or traditional curriculum. Again, as Lave and Wenger (1991) note, situated learning occurs with the absence of the teacher-learner function. They maintain that learning is shared among all the group members and happens through the "changing forms of participation and identity of persons who engaged in a sustained participation in a community of practice: from entrance as a newcomer, through becoming an old-timer" (p. 56).

Lave and Wenger give a prominent place to the role of identities in learning a skill or behavior in situated learning theory. "Newcomers" and "old-timers" represent part of the identity of the participants in their groups. To great extent, learning within a group is influenced by women's in-group identities, which are created by the women themselves. Examples of these group identities include descriptors such as "the group's brain," "the old sister," "the feminist," or "*apla*"—an Arabic term equivalent to female school teacher (used by women to indicate a person that is knowledgeable and educated).

While one could argue that Nabila's learning about critical-thinking and problem-solving skills could be a form of non-formal education, as it was deliberately organized and delivered by *Neqdar Nesharek* through an agreed-upon curriculum, other participants

informally learned the same skills by observing Nabila within their self-created informal groups and applying and practicing those same skills in their everyday lives. While Nabila acquired these skills through non-formal education through her participation with the *Neqdar Neshaarek*, Soha, who is not a former participant of *Neqdaer Nesharek*, acquired the same skills from Nabila as a form of informal incidental learning. Women's learning experiences occur when they did not have any intention of learning something through their spontaneous conversation, but after the experience they became aware that they have learned something. Thus, this incidental learning was unintentional but conscious.

Finally, the previous discussion describes the ways that young women utilize their self-created social networks to generate social capital that accordingly facilitates their civic learning. Young women also recounted several other life skills that they have tacitly learned from each other, including: leadership skills, time management, verbal confidence, negotiation and conflict resolution, communication, budgeting, income generating activities, self-learning, and even sexuality. In addition, women in this study reported that they learned by practicing collective decision-making skills. This was evidenced not only through their everyday interactions within their network, but also every time they put it into practice as a group (e.g. Ola's description of how women collectively decide on a particular dish or event). They also acquired this skill from their involvement in civic actions.

Learning from action

The phenomenon of women's informal learning is complex and difficult to capture through any one definition or theoretical perspective. While the previous discussion expands on theoretical perspectives by providing examples of how learning occurs within women's group and its relation to civic action, the following section demonstrates how the women in this study understand learning as both a prerequisite and result of civic action. From this perspective, if learning is to be understood as both a prerequisite and result of civic action, then knowledge must also be thought of as a robust tool, as opposed to the result of a passive and decontextualized process (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). For the young women from the three villages, learning is a continuous lifelong process; however, transforming learning into knowledge that can be a means for action requires social interaction. Brown, Collins, and Duguid emphasize the importance of the intertwined nature of learning and action, asserting, "people who use tools actively rather than just acquire them, by contrast, build an increasingly rich implicit understanding of the world in which they use the tools and of the tools themselves" (p. 33). Learning from action, however, is largely under-acknowledged. Unlike formal and non-formal education, informal learning through action is frequently invisible and mostly results in tacit knowledge (Mundel, & Schugurensky, 2008). However, for one of the participants, Rasha, and her group mates, informal learning was the result of civic action. For Rasha's group, several months passed before they narrated their experiences of recognition with me in interviews.

Rasha, a 24-year-old woman from Hope village who is married with three children, explained how she and her peers utilized the knowledge and skills they acquired from their everyday experiences and group interactions to take civic action. Furthermore, Rasha's narrative shows how civic action is instrumental for further civic learning. During one of the meetings of Rasha's sardine group, the topic of discussion was the recent announcement by the governor of Fayoum that his governorate had completely eradicated bird-flu from the area. Rasha and several other women in her village are still on a long waiting list to receive vaccine for their home-grown poultry, a fact that prompted her reaction: "I got furiously annoyed when I heard women talking about that announcement." She explained that she was angry because she had been visiting the only veterinary clinic in the village twice a week for the last two months, asking for a vaccine for her stricken poultry. The only answer she received was "we are still running out of vaccine, and there are several people ahead of you on the waiting list." Rasha added:

> I convinced all the women that we must go complain at the Local Council in the nearby village and ask for clarification as to why the governor had announced that Fayoum is free of bird flu…On the agreed-upon day, I went from door-to-door to gather women. We all went to the office of the chairman of the Local Council. His assistant refused to let us in because he was busy, but we waited until he came to us asking what we needed, and why we were there. He never let us in to his office. We told him that the nine of us had been on the waiting list to receive the vaccine for more than two months, and the folks at the clinic told us last week that there are a lot of people ahead of us on the waiting list. We told him that last week the governor announced that Fayoum no longer had any cases of bird flu. I asked him to tell us who we should trust--the governor or the officials at the clinic? He immediately asked me to lower my voice and to come to his office to avoid

> disturbing other people …While in his office, he asked us our names and wrote them down. Then he called the officials at the clinic, telling them that the nine of us would be coming to the clinic tomorrow to receive our vaccine. He walked us to the door, gave the list of our names to his assistant, and asked him to follow up with the clinic to make sure that we receive the vaccine. We went [to the clinic] the next day, and we all received the vaccine as he had promised. As women, we were all happy when we met again in our group. We talked about the entire situation and how we succeeded to get our rights. Other women were curious to learn about what we had done.

Rasha's action as a collective civic action will be discussed in the following chapter; however, it is worth discussing this portion of her narrative at this point because it illustrates the link between women's social interaction within their informal groups and their civic engagement. In addition, her story explains the civic knowledge and skills they acquired through their informal group. First, the women followed and shared the news about the governor's announcement, as freely available public information. This was a way that women are civilly engaged as they keep themselves updated with public news; it is also one of the measures employed by SYPE to assess civic engagement of young people in Egypt. (SYPE, however, employed a generic question to assess young people's civic engagement [i.e. knowing the name of the governor] and neglected such public concerns that affect the everyday lives of young people.) Second, while the women's action was to great extent motivated by the governor's announcement, they still do not know the name of the governor, and they are not even interested in learning what it might be. Third, the action itself represents learning by doing as a predominant learning modality (Mundel & Schugurensky, 2008).

Reflection is an important learning event for the women's action. According to Rasha, "We all were happy when we met again in our group and talked about the entire situation and how we succeeded." Reflecting on the event is what led Rasha and her peers to realize and learn that if they did not mobilize and force government and elected officials to release the vaccine, it would not get done. From this experience, the women learned how to deal with government agencies and elected officials. Reflection on their action led the women to also realize that their everyday lived experiences facilitate the development of a political identity that enables learning about the larger political system and world. However, as Joplin (1981) writes, "experience alone is insufficient to be called experiential education, and it is the reflection process which turns experience into experiential education" (p. 17). While the action they took provided an experience that can facilitate an understanding of purpose and encourage observation of a situation, these activities do not, in and of themselves, lead to knowledge. Reflection is the key component. Through their reflections, the women allowed themselves a space to learn and make connections between their actual experience and the knowledge they drew from this experience. The civic action taken by Rasha and her peers served as a "trigger event" (Cranton, 1994, p. 78) that caused them to question the social norms and the socially constructed gender roles in Hope village. As Cranton (1994) writes, "when contradictory information is found, it may provoke reflection on the currently held knowledge and may even lead to reflection on epistemic meaning perspectives" (p. 78). The women realized that their civic action can facilitate the reconstruction of the repressive social norms that limit women's role to the household and domestic sphere. Thus, as was discussed in Chapter 1, the young women saw that action was likely to involve values and facts that

may contradict the socially constructed authoritative and patriarchal knowledge that they had previously accepted without question.

Learning occurred when the women reflected on their action. Rasha later said that, “now we know how to get our rights, and we learned that if we leave it up to them [the government] we would never receive the vaccine. We will go there whenever they abuse our rights or do not do their job; and next time we will go twenty of us or more, not just nine.” Though Rasha and her peers were not conscious at the time of the magnitude of their action, their engagement held the officials accountable. Of particular importance is Rasha’s expectation that the chairman of the Local Council tells the women the truth about the bird flu epidemic, as a matter of public importance. Given the historic mistrust between residents of Fayoum and successive military regimes (as discussed in Chapter 4), the women’s decision to engage and confront the inaccuracies in the publicly available information is, according to Foley (1999), a “process of engaging with hegemonic and oppositional ideologies and discourses [and] is a learning process” (p. 9). The hegemonic and inaccurate announcement by the governor about the complete eradication of the bird flu epidemic in Fayoum governorate served as a provocative discourse that motivated and created the subjective conditions for the women’s civic action. Encountering this discourse was crucial to raising their consciousness and preparing them for collective action. In addition, the fact that the women got near-immediate results allowed them to learn that civic action was possible. This conforms to Foley’s (1999) argument that “for people to become actively involved in social

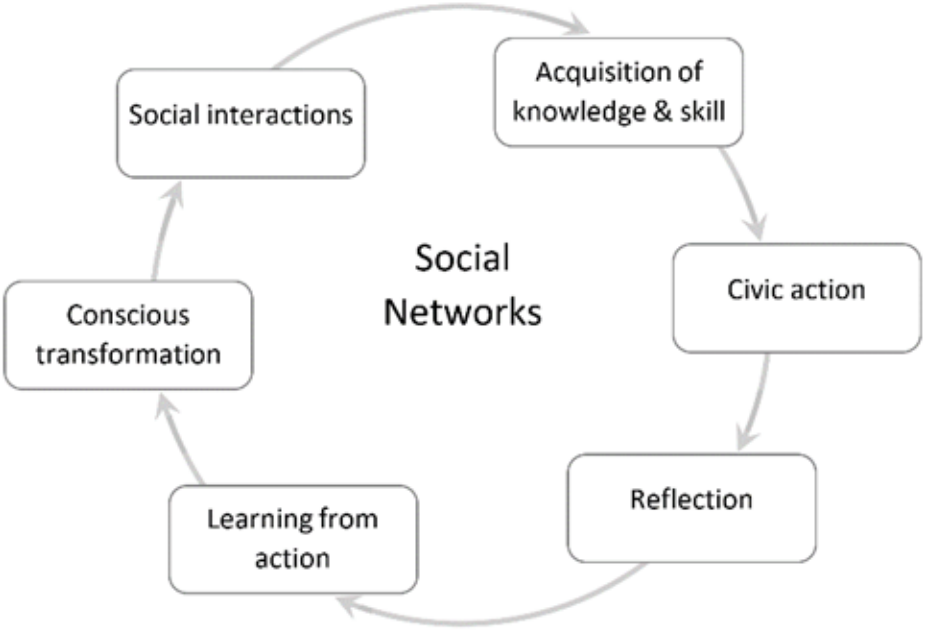
movements something must happen to their consciousness—they must see that action is necessary and possible" (p. 103).

Furthermore, Rasha and her peer's decision to take action by demanding that the chairman of the Local Council clarify why there was a discrepancy between the officials at the veterinary clinic and the governor is an example of self-directed learning. When the women learned that change is possible when the status quo is disrupted, they were experiencing incidental, but conscious, learning. In this vein, according to Foley (1999), incidental learning occurs as "people live, work, and engage in social action" (pp. 6-7). However unintentionally, the women learned that if they did not mobilize and organize they would not get the officials to do their job or receive the vaccine. Finally, the women tacitly internalized the value of accountability when they held the officials to their word; however, they may not have been aware that they had learned these skills until after they had a chance for reflection.

The success of their civic action provided the women with a tangible outcome: the vaccine. Perhaps more importantly, the action provided Rasha and her peers a sense of confidence and empowerment that could be described as transformative learning. Cranton (1994) asserts that the "empowered learner is able to fully and freely participate in critical discourse and the resulting action" (p. 73). Rasha's growing sense of confidence and empowerment led her to transform her learning into another action. As discussed in Chapter 4, Rasha took 15 women to the National Council for Women in Fayoum to help them obtain a national ID.

Sabreen's narrative provides another example of conscious transformation. Though she is from a different village than Rasha, the example of her inheritance (discussed in Chapter 4) illustrates these connections. Sabreen learned from social interaction in her group to challenge the status quo, which in turn assisted in the deconstruction of dominant power relations. Sabreen said, "When I learned from my women peers that it [inheritance] is our legal right, and not a gift from my brother, and when I felt capable, I decided to sue my brother in the court." Sabreen's experience of learning illustrates Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory. Lave and Wenger posit that learner support is the most important element to facilitating the process of transformative learning. *Figure 5.2* below depicts and concludes the six-stage process used by the young women to informally learn from their social interactions and civic action as a form of authentic learning.

Figure 5.2 – Women's learning in group and in civic action



Throughout the interviews, women explained several informal learning incidents, many of which related to collective decision-making and consensus building. Many women in this study recounted several experiences in which they informally learned from the collective actions of informal groups. In the next chapter, I will provide more examples of how participants learned from action. I will also share several examples of the ways in which women in this study took individual, civic engagement and action. Finally, while the connection between civic skills and civic engagement may be theoretically understood, the relationship between what young women narrated as life skills and recognition needs further explanation. The following section discusses the relationship between women's life skills, civic skills, and recognition.

Life skills, civic skills, and recognition

During the interviews, participants made clear connections between what they believed to be life skills that they had learned through their social interactions (e.g. cooking, time management, communication, critical thinking and problem solving) and civic engagement. Learning of these connections was a disturbing moment in my research. While in the field, I noticed that I tended to place what the women were saying during the interviews into categories that were informed by the in-depth review of literature that I completed prior to engaging with them. My review of literature shaped my theoretical framework and informed my research questions. Two major conclusions from my literature review are that: 1) social interactions within social networks facilitate learning, and 2) group social capital facilitates sharing cumulative knowledge and human capital among members. To the second point, I had found that politically relevant social

capital facilitates sharing political knowledge and skills among members, which in turn reduces the cost of participation. As a result, this reduction in cost allows women to gradually participate more in public life.

These two findings from my review of literature were upended when it became clear that the real lives of young women in the three villages did not fit precisely into my categories. Perhaps there might have been a greater fit between the literature and their lives if I straddled a positivistic stance that more closely resembled the SYPE approach I discussed in Chapter 3. Several women mentioned that they learned some civic skills and many life skills while interacting with their peers, and that these skills facilitated their civic engagement. Connection between civic skills and civic engagement, however, conforms to what have been theorized by scholars from different disciplines as discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Data suggests that civic skills, like civic knowledge, are also a byproduct of social interactions by women within their informal groups. Throughout the interviews, women believed there were connections between their social interactions within a group, their learning, and the acquisition of civic skills. Rasha, Ola, Amira, Nabila, Zainab, Reda, Soha, and Nesma's previous narratives explain how they were able to acquire and master skills like deliberation, collective decision making, critical thinking, and problem solving, as well as the confidence to talk and communicate. These are all considered to be the civic skills that foster civic engagement (Kirlin, 2003). In addition, the young women's involvement in the mobilization, organization, and governance of their informal groups develops their capacities for leadership and governance, both of which are crucial to

facilitating civic engagement. The young women in this study explained how learning to debate and express their points of view (including a political opinion) was a civic skill. It is important to explore how the young women in this study have conceptualized and made sense of civic skills from different, multi-disciplinary perspectives, including: political socialization, education, developmental psychology, and youth development. It is also important to understand the extent to which the theories and arguments of many prominent scholars and theorists correspond to my participant's conceptualization of the relationship between their everyday social interactions in women's groups and the acquisition of civic skills.

It is hypothesized that there is a relationship between interactions in social networks and the development of civic skills. The women in this study speak of these relationships and interactions in their own words. Brady, Verba and Schlozman (1995) write of an association between participation in social networks and civic engagement, and they also argue that an individual's affiliation with a network is effective for the acquisition of civic skills. They assert that the "acquisition of skills depends upon the level of skill opportunity provided by the domain; the extent to which involvement in the domain is socially structured; and the extent to which opportunities for skill development are socially structured among those affiliated" (p. 320). Likewise, Milbrath and Goel (1977) note that similar to the motivational role of education that leads to an increased understanding of the importance of civic participation, discussions of politics within social networks provide civic skills and can enhance the motivation of people to become civically engaged.

Kirlin (2003) classified civic skills in four dominant categories that I believe are important to understanding how the women in my study conceptualize their civic skills. These skills fit to great extent under these categories: 1) organization skills that are necessary for accomplishing tasks; 2) communication skills that include making oral presentations or speeches to persuade others or contacting elected officials; 3) collective decision-making skills, including the interrelated skills of expressing one's own opinion, hearing others, and working toward a consensus; and, 4) critical-thinking skills that include identifying, describing, analyzing and thinking constructively to formulate positions on public issues. In this chapter I have presented examples of the ways in which the women in this study use civic skills to facilitate action. Kirlin's four dominant categories are one way to understand Rasha's experience in working with her peers to receive bird flu vaccines.

While making a direct connection between the civic skills that the women learned from their everyday lives and Kirlin's (2003) four categories of civic skills is a relatively easy task, making a connection between other life skills (e.g. cooking, sexuality) and women's civic engagement is not as easy. In order to understand the connections between life skills and civic engagement, one must assume an interdisciplinary theoretical lens. For example, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, Laila, a 21-year-old married woman with two children who is from Bright village, is a noticeably active woman who has led and participated in different civic initiatives. Laila was one of several women who made a connection between their life skills and civic participation:

> My mother-in-law is like any mother-in-law. She is strong, a micromanager, and not easy going. She used to treat me as a child, not as a mature, married adult. She has the ability to prevent me from going out by keeping me busy with housework twenty-four hours per day. But I learned how to organize and manage my time, and I am now able to prioritize important things. I am also more confident now than before. When she prevented me from going out to participate with others in things that benefit all of our community, I first clashed with her, but she forced my husband to punish me. But later I reconciled with her, and I deliberately finished all my housework responsibilities in order to avoid her interference. This saved me some time to go out participate with other women in things that I really like and found myself in it. She is still not very friendly with me, but she has nothing to do with me as I do not give her any chance to control me or cause any troubles. She has now started to take my opinion in things that she never did before, although I am the youngest of her daughters-in-law. In addition, my husband is now happy with my new '*characteristic'* as he called it.

Laila's tale shows how important her learned life skills (i.e. time management and self-confidence) are in dealing with and avoiding the authoritative attitude of her mother-in-law and gaining the appreciation of her husband. The connection between life skills and civic engagement, however, remains ambiguous. Fraser (1999) provides a useful analysis that helps to clear up the ambiguity between the life skills and civic engagement of young women in Fayoum. Fraser used two concepts to build this theory: first, it is important to understand the relationship between interest and identity (i.e. redistribution and recognition) and how these two concepts affect women's participation. Fraser contends, "understanding and redressing gender injustice requires changing and attending to both distribution and recognition" (p. 26). Second, Fraser finds it necessary to theorize the relationship between class and status on one axis and maldistribution and

misrecognition on the other. According to Fraser, maldistribution of resources is a major reason that "structures the fundamental division between paid 'productive' labor and unpaid 'reproductive' and domestic labor, assigning women primary responsibility for the latter" (p. 31). Misrecognition of cultural difference, according to Fraser, is a major feature of gender injustice where the authoritative construction of norms privileges traits associated with masculinity and persistently devaluates others. Fraser contends that women, are "to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life as a consequence of *institutionalized* patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem" (emphasis in the original, p. 35). Employing the concepts of recognition and redistribution helps one understand them as they relate to the life skills and civic engagement of young women in Fayoum.

The young women in this study, especially those who participated in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program, gained some recognition from their families and communities as they were able to shake the socially constructed division of labor between women and men that is present in rural societies. As maintained by Fraser (1999), women's ability to engage in paid productive labor contributes to lift the imbalanced maldistribution of their society. However, due to the gender-specific reproductive and domestic labor roles ascribed to them, women's opportunities to engage in paid, productive labor outside the home is viewed as secondary to their socially constructed, unpaid labor inside the home. One of the major objectives of *Neqdar Nesharek* was to "empower young, rural, Upper Egyptian women economically by providing them with business skills and support that

enable them to join an existing business or start a business, including access to microfinance and markets, registration and licensing, and other logistics" (Ramadan, Abdel-Tawab, Elsayed, & Roushdy, 2014, p. vii).

One of the positive effects of the *Neqdar Nesharek* is its recognition that women can succeed by engaging in paid labor; however, it is beyond the scope of this study to fully engage in an analysis of the economic byproducts of this program. For example, as was noted in the Chapter 4, Nadia (mother of Nayera, one of the former participants of *Neqdar Nesharek* from Bright village), explained that she encouraged her daughter to participate in the program so she could make some money and contribute to her marriage. Only one of the few non-*Neqdar Nesharek* young women that I interviewed referred to economic benefits as a byproduct of the social interactions that happen in the women's group. Although Nadia's perspectives on her daughter's participation provide possible insight to the relationship between social networks and economic opportunities, I did not pursue this concept further. The purpose of this study was to look at the impact of social networks on the civic engagement of young women; therefore, it is beyond the scope of the study to hypothesize these economic connections. Yet, I recognize that this is an area of further research that is needed, especially since it might shine light on the relationship between the redistribution and recognition of rural women.

Rather, what I show is that the life skills that participants in this study have learned through their participation in women's groups played a noticeable role in their ability to gain recognition in their families and society as a valued person. The data suggests that within their social networks women learn in different, but interwoven ways.

One way to understand these differences is to view them as operating as a part of a process where women acquire the knowledge and skills needed to challenge their status quo. In addition, learning may take the form of critical reflection as women question their socioeconomic status within a patriarchal society. This is similar to Freire's (2002) term "cultural circle," a phrase coined to describe his literacy programs in Brazil that worked to turn adult learners from being the objects to subjects in their learning. According to Freire, the cultural circle offers "the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and transform [their] reality" (p. 4). From this perspective, the women in this study develop a capacity to engage in a self-realization of the social and cultural injustices and the distinctive characteristics assigned to them as a form of misrecognition (Fraser, 1999). However, women's groups, as a space where women can extend their household responsibility by talking about issues including cooking and child rearing, may be seen as one of these distinctive characteristics that reproduce the misrecognition. Upon reflection, it was at this moment that I realized how difficult it would be to theorize how women attempt to make connections between their life skills and civic engagement, especially in cases where those life skills, such as cooking, sexuality, and child rearing, are not directly related to civic skills. Even though learning these life skills may support the social and cultural injustices that assign unpaid, reproductive and domestic labor to women, these skills may also be viewed as a way for women to employ their everyday experiences to earn recognition. As Foley (1999) contends, "people's everyday experience reproduces ways of thinking and acting which support the, often oppressive, status quo, but that this same experience also produces recognitions which enable people to critique and challenge the existing order" (pp. 3-4).

Nasser and Gamal are two of the husbands I interviewed during the course of this research. They both explained their motives for allowing their wives to participate in a women's group. In both cases, their decision shows a desire that their wives be recognized. Nasser, from Bright village, explained the change he recognized in his wife:

> Here in the village, we are not like cities, as in Fayoum. We lack most of the basic services that are necessary for survival. As you may know, we do not have any health services here in the village, and we have to travel to Fayoum when one of the children gets sick. Women know how to protect the kids and how to treat them when they get sick. I realized that when she goes to chat with those women, my wife acquired a lot of treatment techniques and learned how to prevent our children from getting the widespread communicable diseases that are here in the village.

Nasser not only recognizes the change in his wife's knowledge about public health issues and her increased capacity to prevent their children from getting sick, but he also realizes the new role she is playing to save both money and the effort needed to take their kids to Fayoum to receive medical services. Nasser's realization recognizes his wife's abilities and the ways that she is contributing to household financing by saving on health services costs. On the one hand, Nasser's perspectives may still be viewed as an extension of the belief that a woman's role is to be reproductive, unpaid labor; however, on the other hand, his ideas also hint that his wife has the power to increase standing within the family.

Unlike Nasser, Gamal realized two other effects of his wife's participation in her women's group:

> Staying at home the whole day together, my wife and my mother quarrel with each other for no reason. While I cannot blame my mother, I know that my wife is innocent. Therefore, when my wife asked to participate in this group (I know all of them by the way), I found it a good chance to justify separating them for at least two hours every day. But I have to admit that their relationship now is in a different stage. I couldn't believe it when my mother told me that she learned some new recipes from my wife. I am also happy that some of our neighbors are happy with her initiative to clean and maintain our alley with other women. You know what, although I was born here, I learned about several community resources for the first time, from my wife, who said that she learned about them from other women.

In this excerpt, Gamal realizes and recognizes that the oppressive, authoritative relationship between women and their mothers-in-law is socially constructed and constraining to younger women's participation and civic engagement. In addition, Gamal seems pleased that he and his mother could benefit from his wife teaching them new recipes and knowledge about community resources that are available in the village. Gamal's narrative helps to illustrate the connection between life skills and civic engagement that women are frequently asked to make. Gamal also indicates awareness that his wife's civic engagement (her role in the initiative to clean and maintain their alley with other women) is directly tied to her participation in the women's group. The absence of recognition from families and society is conceptualized by Fraser (1999) as a 'misrecognition' that:

> …Constitutes an impediment to the self-realization of the oppressed…[and] unjust that some individuals and groups are denied the status of full partners in social interaction simply as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural

> value in whose construction they have not equally participated and which disparage their distinctive characteristics (p. 34).

Without a way to recognize that women's successes are earned through both their life skills and civic engagement, women will continue to be denied the status of full partner and equal participant in social life and interactions. Fraser terms this as '*participation parity.'* This, therefore, helps explain the connection made by young women between life skills they have learned through their participation in the self-created networks and their increasing civic role. Such explanation also helps to build theories for how young women employ those life skills as instrumental learning, control their environment through these skills, and gain emancipation through social recognition as prerequisites for civic engagement.

Summary

The phenomenon of rural, young women's learning is complex and difficult to capture in any one definition or from a single theoretical perspective. From the perspective of situated learning theory, learning is a socio-cultural phenomenon. It starts with action where young women involve themselves in social interaction within their individually constructed social networks. Women's conversation, as activity and as the context for learning, facilitates opportunities for reflection, which helps to shape this learning. Conversation, as a mode of informal learning, is a fundamentally Vygotskian view. From this perspective, women attain learning as they come together in a network and engage in full social interaction. Women's narrative emphasizes the key role of their interaction in generating social capital that facilitated their civic learning. In addition,

young women in this study recounted that learning within their social networks is not limited to acquiring civic knowledge and skills for further action; rather, learning is a continuous process where women learn from their action. Thus, women's social networks are avenues for learning directed at enhancing their capacity to act in and change their world. The next chapter discusses the relationship between social networks and civic engagement; particularly, it discusses how young women draw upon and apply what they have learned within their groups to advance their civic engagement. The examples given by the women in this study illustrate that social networks and civic engagement are instrumental to furthering opportunities for collective action and civic learning. Finally, apart from Rasha's recount on the effect of her participation in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program on her self-realization of the social and cultural injustices and the distinctive characteristics assigned to women as a form of misrecognition, the chapter found no significant difference between the *Neqdar Nesharek* participants and non-participants.

Chapter Six: Women's "invisible" civic and political participation

This chapter discusses how young women draw upon and apply what they have learned through their social interaction within their self-created social networks in relation to their civic and political participation and agency. The chapter is set to answer the third research question: how are these young women drawing upon and applying what they learned in these informal groups. In doing so, I divided the chapter into three sections, each of which is aimed at better understanding women's civic and political participation through: first, recounting narratives in which participants discuss their experiences of making civic contributions where I list some of the vivid civic and political participation examples narrated by young women; second, discussing how the narratives illustrate the strategies used by participants to reinforce their civic and political participation; and lastly, through analyzing what the narratives might have to say about how participants have developed a sense of agency. Finally, the chapter also provides inputs for answering the fourth question jointly with the discussion from chapter four.

Introduction

Young women in the rural communities of Fayoum are often perceived as politically disengaged; however, even if this were true, it does not account for the wide range of ways that women participate in the civic life of their societies. Research, like SYPE, that has concluded that young women are politically disengaged is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the problem of political engagement is frequently understood through ill-defined nomenclatures that lack the capacity to account for and theorize the everyday lives and experiences of young women. Second, the methodologies and

methods that have been used in previous studies have not been able to fully capture the wide range of experiences that might be understood as civic engagement and political participation. For example, previous studies (including SYPE) relied on quantitative methodological approaches to argue that young women simply were apathetic to state-sponsored activities, and, as a result, were unlikely to take action to change their circumstances. Such research is shortsighted because it does not make room for a deeper understanding and interpretation of apathy (e.g. boycotting—understood in this research as refrain from voting in public elections) as latent participation, an intentional stance that in and of itself constitutes a form of civic engagement and political participation (Ekman & Amna, 2012). As this research study has found, young women in Fayoum demonstrate numerous kinds and types of civic engagement that are important, even if they are rendered "invisible" by the theoretical and methodological stances used in previous research. The preceding chapters highlight how young women experience civic and political spheres through their everyday lives.

Chapter 5 presented numerous examples in which the young women spoke of the relationships between their everyday lives and experiences, affiliations with social networks, and civic practice. Participants recounted the ways in which civic actions were shaped through informal civic learning that was framed as being in-group and motivated by different discourses and action. In Chapter 5, I demonstrated how women's everyday interactions within informal groups generate social capital, which in turn facilitates informal learning, including civic knowledge and skills. The previous chapter also explored: 1) how women learned from their civic action; 2) how women transformed the

local and regional political status quo in order to reach emancipatory ends; 3) how women gained power when they band together in networks, which creates possibilities for addressing and supporting collective needs (Fukuyama 2002); 4) how participants learned and taught each other civic skills in their women's groups; and 5) that the teaching and learning of skills opens up opportunities for families, local communities, and ultimately, the larger society to recognize young women and that women can be civically engaged.

In previous chapters, I focused on my first two research questions by exploring how young women understand and discuss the social and political issues that impact their lives and shape their identities within their communities (Chapter 4), and how young women understand their experiences of their self-created women groups in relation to their civic learning (Chapter 5). In this chapter, I turn to my third research question to explore how young women draw upon and apply what they have learned through their social interaction within their self-created social networks. In the remaining of this chapter, I provide an account of 13 vivid civic engagement examples narrated by young women. Then I will discuss the strategies developed and used by participants to reinforce their new civic roles. Finally, I will analyze women's personal and collective agency as narrated by young women.

Women's civic and political participation

Each of the young women interviewed participated in the public life of their society in various ways. Notably, each of the women spoke about how their participation in social interactions with others evolved to include informal learning. It is important to

point out that for some women these skills changed from impulsive and spontaneous participation to a kind of self-reliance that was capable of participating in well planned civic initiatives and collective action. This shift toward self-reliance and development of a personal vision represents a form of agency that I will I discuss later in this chapter. It is worth noting, however, that while this chapter recognizes and labels some of the activities as examples of civic engagement, some of the women understood their actions as a part of their everyday lives. In other words, some of the women that participated in this study might not use terminology like "civic engagement" because they reported that their activities were a part of living as members of a society. In addition, women's civic action represents one component and outcome of their more expansive in-group civic learning. Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) identify civic learning outcome as the civic knowledge, skills, and values needed by individuals to be effective, active citizen capable of developing political preferences and initiating civic action.

Lake and Huckfeldt's definition indicates that civic outcomes require the acquisition of both civic skills and civic knowledge. The women in this study achieved this outcome through their interactions with each other in their groups. One example of this process is Ola's incidental learning about the skills needed for voting, and the ways in which her learning might be considered a civic engagement activity (see Ola's quote in Chapter 5). Likewise, another example of civic engagement can be found in Rasha and her peers' (see Rasha's quote in Chapter 5) choice to listen to the news as a way to engage in the public concern of the bird flu pandemic. Furthermore, as I and others have argued, women's affiliation with personal and volunteer networks (e.g. women's

individually constructed social networks) is a form of civic engagement (Putnam, 1993; Singerman, 1995; Wedeen, 2008). The young women in this study recounted that their discussions within women's groups were a form of engagement in their public life. Berelson (1954) contends that discussion, like the kinds of conversations that happened in the women's groups, resembles some of the characteristics of a democratic system: "if there is one characteristic for a democratic system (beside the ballot itself) that is theoretically required, it is the capacity for and the practice of discussion" (p. 306). In the same vein, these casual social groups represent one form of informal civil society and "the richest source of civic vitality in the Arab world" as discussed by (Yom, 2005, p. 19) in Chapter 2; and, as argued by Tocqueville (1838), are "free schools of democracy" (as cited in Foley & Edwards, 1996, p. 42).

The narratives suggest that women do not make public engagement decisions in a vacuum, but rather, they use their everyday social interactions to alter their decisions about how to spend their time. Several political theorists have similarly asserted that public engagement decisions are frequently made in everyday interactions (see, for example: Berelson, 1954; McClurg, 2003; Milbrath, & Goel, 1977; Putnam, 2000; Richardson, 2003; Sinclair, 2012). Overall, the data in this study suggests that young women are active participants in and initiators of various civic activities, so long as one is willing to look beyond the more formal notions of political engagement, such as whether the participants voted or knew the name of their governor.

To better understand women's civic and political participation, I draw on Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology of civic engagement and political participation as a

conceptual and theoretical lens capable of analyzing the following civic examples as narrated by young women in rural Fayoum. Ekman and Amna's typology highlights the multidimensionality and distinctions that exist between civic engagement and political participation. The typology helps to classify and distinguish between manifest political participation and unconventional participation. Manifest political participation, according to this typology, is a public domain that includes all conventional participation in traditional channels of political involvement in parliamentary sphere. Unconventional participation refers to civic activities within civil and private domain including social and associational involvement and voluntary work. In the following section, I draw on 13 participants' narratives to share examples of their civic and political participation.

Example one: Rasha and her peers' vaccine initiative

In Chapter 4, I introduced Rasha and her peers, a sardine group in Hope Village that complained about the failure of the government veterinary clinic to address the lack of bird flu vaccine. In summary, Rasha and her fellow young women organized and mobilized themselves as a reaction to the governor of Fayoum's inaccurate claims about the eradication of the bird flu from the region. Rasha and her peers went to question the chairman of the Local Council, and as a result, were able to influence two of the state's institutions in order to secure their social rights as citizens. The actions taken by Rasha and her peers are not only an example of civic engagement, but also a demonstration of the classic understanding of citizenship. According to Marshall (1950), the elements of citizenship can be organized into one of three core elements: civil rights, social rights, and political rights. From this understanding of citizenship, Rasha and her peer's decision

to speak out and question the inaccurate rhetoric of the governor (the highest government official in their governorate) was an exercise of speech, one of their civil rights. By influencing two government agencies and compelling action to address a public health threat, the women were practicing their political rights. Finally, by securing the vaccine, the women were expecting the government to act in ways that preserved economic welfare and security for its citizens, or social rights. Another framework that is useful for analyzing the actions of the women is Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology. From this perspective, Rasha and her peers were manifesting political activism by contacting government representatives and elected official, and interacting with the formal political structures of the governorate.

Example two: Laila and the gangplank

In Bright village, the peasants drain their farms' excess surface irrigation into an agricultural waterway. The waterway, which is filled with agricultural wastewater, goes through the village, dividing it into two banks that are connected through only one bridge. The farmers cross the bridge with their modest agricultural equipment and livestock, which means that the bridge is frequently busy and far from most residents. In order to bypass the bottlenecks on the bridge, some male farmers attempt to ford the waterway when they do not have their equipment or livestock in tow. Fording the waterway is not a viable or safe option for most women and children. In separate incidents, two children on their way home from kindergarten sank and drowned when they attempted to cross the waterway at one of the narrow points. As a result of these incidents, several women chose

to avoid risks by not sending their children to the only kindergarten run by the community development association of the village.

After participating in *Neqdar Nesharek*, Laila and three other women led a volunteer initiative to build a basic wooden gangplank passageway across the waterway so that children in the village could safely cross and get to the kindergarten. Laila and her colleagues used two halves of a palm tree to build a gangplank that spanned the waterway. In doing so, they sought the help of their husbands. In her interview, Laila explained that the gangplank, while certainly safer than the attempts children would take to jump over the water, was not a full replacement for the busy and far away bridge; however, it did shorten the distance that women and children would need to travel in order to reach the kindergarten. From the perspective of Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology, the women's initiative is an example of both an attention to social involvement and civic engagement. When the group of women took voluntary, collective action outside of the domestic sphere, they were solving a problem of public concern, and acting in ways that preserved safety for other members of the community.

Example three: Mona's paramedic volunteering

Dream village has no health services apart from a modest, small, private clinic that is open for three hours on Sundays and Wednesdays. Residents of the village travel to Fayoum Center when they need to receive public health services. Mona, a 21-year-old, married woman and mother to two children, is a resident of Dream village and works as its only paramedic. Mona is not a nurse or a paramedic by training, but she has completed a two-day first aid training session and has learned a few basic nursing techniques. As a

paramedic, Mona volunteers some of her time to provide free services to elders and chronic patients who are in need of medical injections and other basic treatments. In addition to providing these free services, she responds to requests from all other residents who are in need of help in a medical emergency. Dream village is more than two hours away from the nearest available health services, and due to a lack of public transportation, receiving medical emergency service in the late evening hours is nearly impossible for some poor villagers. In spite of these severe constraints, Mona responds to the needs of her community at all hours of the day, including evenings and weekends.

During her interview, Mona spoke about her interest in serving her village: "The most important reward for me is that I am helping my neighbors, and I am known to everyone in the village." Mona's volunteer work was mentioned and appreciated by other people whom I interviewed or had a side conversation with during my research in Dream village. Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology can be used to understand Mona's actions as an individual form of both social involvement and civic engagement in the private domain. In addition, Mona's first aid training also illustrates how learning new skills makes contributions to her recognition from her family and the community at large.

Example four: Salma's aerobic club

Salma, a resident of Bright village, has used her participation in a woman's group as an impetus for organizing volunteer opportunities aimed at improving public health. A 23-year-old, married mother of two children, Salma explained how her participation in a women's group facilitated an initiative to help women have more access to exercise. She recounted that:

> Because there are too many obese women in the village and that affects their health and limits their involvement in different aspects of their daily lives. They do not feel happy with their body, and I thought it would be a good idea if the local community development association helped to establish a women-only gymnasium. All women I talked with about the idea were so excited and willing to pay for a membership, as required. I personally knew the officials at the community development association through my participation in the *Neqdar Nesharek*, and I knew that they had plenty of spaces to host this activity. I went to meet them and discussed the idea on behalf of all women. However, they laughed at me, and never took the idea seriously. One of them was even mad at me and suggested that I spend my time mobilizing and encouraging women to come learn and recite the Quran instead of encouraging women to waste their time on meaningless and improper aerobics. I tried to convince them twice, but they never changed their minds. Frankly speaking, I was frustrated and decided to organize the activities at home with all of my husband's sisters-in-law and few other women from the group who lived close by. We still meet frequently in the morning to exercise, after our husbands leave for work.

While Salma believes that she was not able to implement her initiative because of the male-dominated society and its strict, gender-based roles for women, she was still proud of her ability to recognize a need and take action to address it for the betterment of her community. Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology might understand Salma's initiative to help women in her village as an individual form of both social involvement and civic engagement in the private domain.

Example five: Saleema, the "first chairwoman in Fayoum"

While participating in *Neqdar Nesharek*, through a local community development association, Saleema, and her peers Sawsan, Rasha, Nashwa, and Hanan, faced several

challenges. The director of the association threatened to end their participation in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program if they didn't donate half of the allowance they receive as program participants to the association. According to Saleema, the director wanted the women to sign in for the full amount of their allowance, but only receive half of it. The women believed the director's request was a form of corruption and injustice, as the association already received rent and other benefits as a local partner of the program. Saleema convinced her peers to establish their own nonprofit organization. They established the first woman-run organization in the village. The organization became a venue for meetings to discuss participation in their society's public affairs.

Saleema and her colleagues hoped that by establishing their own organization that they could host the *Neqdar Nesharek* activities that were being provided by the other community development organization. Unfortunately, the program was phased out before the organization was able to meet all the requirements for official registration with the local branch of the Ministry of Social Solidarity, the agency responsible for overseeing and supervising NGOs in Egypt. In spite of this setback, their organization received some funding from a reproductive health project for rural women living in three governorates in Upper Egypt. Saleema and her colleagues used the funding to organize reproductive health awareness sessions. The organization is also coordinating three literacy classes and running a small kindergarten. Saleema is the first elected chair of the organization, and the only female chairperson of all NGOs in Fayoum. In these capacities, as the chairperson and director of the organization, she is frequently invited to public events

held by the Ministry of Social Solidarity, the governorate of Fayoum, and other donor agencies.

Saleema's public role began to put a strain on her marriage, and her husband asked her to choose between their marriage and serving as chair of her organization. As a result, Saleema and her husband got divorced. Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology might understand Saleema's organization and initiatives as a collective form of civil participation. This participation includes both social involvement and civic engagement that is actively situated within a community-based organization that serves their society in the private domain.

Example six: Heba's collective garbage collection

Heba noticed that her neighbors in Dream village were no longer able to pay for their monthly garbage collection fees. The 21-year-old, married, mother of two saw her neighbor's children carrying their garbage containers to the irrigation canal, where they would dump their trash into the water. Heba realized that her neighbor's garbage was unsafe and polluting the water canal. As a result, she proposed that neighboring households share one big garbage bin instead of each family having their own. She approached women from households that shared her alley, proposing the idea of sharing a garbage bin. The women welcomed the idea, and Heba took responsibility for collecting dues from the five neighboring homes for the purpose of purchasing a large garbage bin. It was also decided that each house would pay a portion of the fee each month for the trash service. Through this initiative, Heba's neighbors were able to have their trash removed for one-fifth the monthly fee while also keeping the water canal clean. After

seeing how successful Heba's initiative was, several other nearby homes adopted her idea.

Heba's example, according to Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology might interpret Heba's narrative as an individual form of both social involvement and civic engagement in the public domain as it is about a public good – safe water and sanitation. Even though Heba's idea and initiative entail some concerns that her actions may have sidestepped rules governing how residents pay a fee for receiving a service, this is a form of important civic action particularly where the rules may not serve particularly poor people (e.g., they are excessive in their fees rather than being a public good).

Example seven: Nayera's peer-to-peer banking

Nayera organized a 24-month rotating savings and credit association for 25 women and men in her neighborhood of Bright village. Like most rural communities in developing countries, young women in rural Fayoum organize and run these sorts of associations as a form of peer-to-peer banking and lending for people in need who cannot afford or do not have collateral. Nayera, a 24-year-old married mother of four, organized a system through which 23 people pay 100 Egyptian Pounds for a monthly membership. Two young women share one membership, paying 50 Egyptian Pounds each. Nayera volunteers the time and efforts needed to organize this rotating savings and credit association. Although this arrangement may entail some risk if any members are not able to pay their monthly installments, Nayera believes it is worth her efforts. First, Nayera reports that she is happy helping people who cannot use conventional banks for credit

because they do not have proper legal documentation or collateral. Second, Nayera stated that she is committed to returning favors back to her community because she has received similar support during a time of financial need:

> …Yes, I am aware that it has some risk if someone doesn't pay the monthly membership after receiving the full amount in advance. I am vulnerable because I am not able to afford it if they were to fall behind in their payments. But I feel obliged to help them, as they helped me when I was preparing for my *gihaz* [sets of home furnishings] to get married. I still remember that my neighbors organized a *game'ya* [rotating saving and credit association] for me to buy a few more things before the wedding. I paid it back in monthly installments until I had my first child…there is always a reason that we all have to come together to help a person in need, whether it be to marry, to start a small business, to have a surgery, or to buy a ticket to travel abroad for work.

Like Nayera, several young women mentioned that they either initiate and organize a rotating saving association or participate in a one. Nayera mentioned that the current rotating saving association is the third one that she has organized, and that members have been committed to paying their monthly installments on time. According to Nayera, organizing such an event helps her gain more recognition from her family and society. Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology provides insight into understanding Nayera's narrative, as it is an example of an individual form of both social involvement and civic engagement in the private domain. The association can also be seen as a collective form of social involvement; but it also provides a service where it is lacking from the public or private industry. Those who join Nayera in the association are

responsible for providing the funds and assets for those who are in immediate financial need.

Example eight: Reda and the flooding sewer

One morning Reda awoke in Hope village to find that the sewer had flooded, filling the entire alley. Reda, who is 21 years old married, and the mother to one child, sells vegetables in front of her house as a way to help provide additional income for her household. The sewers in Hope village are not a public system serviced by the municipality; rather, they are built and maintained by neighbors. As a result, the sewers operate in a very basic way, collecting waste from the alley and dumping it into the village's water canal. Reda recalled that:

> …It was an early morning and soon kids would be getting ready to go to school and men to work. I decided to put some stones in the water to make a way for people to pass through the flooded sewer until we could have a plumber fix it. As I finished putting the stones down, my neighbors joined in, throwing whatever sand or garbage they had to make a walkway so kids don't get wet and dirty. After the kids went to school, I went to get estimate of the maintenance and repair cost from a plumber. I divided the estimate total by the number of homes in the alley. By noon, I had knocked on all the doors in the alley to collect each portion of the plumber's fee. The plumber fixed the problem and drained all the flooded water before the kids and men returned that afternoon.

Reda was reluctant to label her example as a civic engagement activity. She felt that it might not be as important as other examples that benefit more people in the village. However, she told the story when one of the women in a focus group prompted her to

mention the incident. Later Reda said that she was happy that what she did could be seen as a form of civic engagement.

Relating Reda's action to Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology reveals her volunteer action is an example of an individual form of both social involvement and civic engagement in the private domain. Although it is an important civic action, according to the definition of civic engagement by Adler and Goggin (2005) as mentioned in chapter one, such example is hard to capture through a questionnaire as in the case of SYPE methodology. One reason is that Reda, as the person who initiated and carried out this civic initiative, did not want to talk about her initiative believing that it may not be a civic action. This resulted from the fact that several women struggled to identify civic engagement during my interviews with them and some women believe that their civic actions reflect their role as women.

Example nine: Amina's stove gas initiative

The lack of gas for stoves is a major problem that affects most households in Egypt, but especially in rural communities. Gas for stoves is a government-subsidized commodity strictly distributed and rationed. In Dream village, however, the gas problem is so severe that the local municipality sends a truck full of gas containers (50 kilograms each) to the village once a week. This one truck provides less than one-quarter of the village's need; therefore, residents of the village (mainly women) crowd and fight over the gas every week. Receiving one gas container at least once per month has become an ongoing problem for most women who suffer the long wait and occasional sexual harassment from the crowd.

Amina, a 25-year-old married woman from Dream village, saw these problems as an opportunity to take initiative. She prepared and distributed four-color cards, one per household in four different stages, to ensure that every household would receive one gas container per month, according to their card color. She hoped that this system would help women avoid the harassment that many face each time they must wait for a gas container. Although several people and households complied with the four-color card rule, there are some, according to Amina, who still insist on violating the rules of the widely agreed-upon system.

Before I had the chance to meet Amina, I had heard about her initiative from several other women and men in Dream village. The popularity of her initiative was a sign of how much it had resonated with several other young women of the village, though it did not completely solve the problem. In addition, one of the husbands I interviewed as part of this study also referred to Amina's initiative. All of this recognition from peers indicates the way young women's civic action can be made visible to both families and societies. From the perspective of Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology, Amina's initiative is an individual form of both social involvement and civic engagement in the private domain. Furthermore, the initiative can be also seen, according to Ekman and Amna's typology, as an active form of an *anti-political* act in the public political domain where the initiative reflects frustration over the failure of the government to provide needed resources.

Example ten: Omaima and Doreya's election observation

Omaima and Doreya are young women from Bright village who participated as election observers during the last parliamentary elections in Egypt (December 2015). The two women were excited to participate as election observers on behalf of a female candidate who was running for the newly established seat in the Fayoum governorate. The seat was the result of efforts to reserve seats specifically for a quota of women. Omaima and Doreya's candidate won the election and became a member of the parliament representing their governorate.

While these two women were working on behalf of the same candidate, they each had slightly differing reasons and motives for their participation. Omaima and Doreya were both motivated by a hope for personal gains that they might receive as a result of their involvement. Omaima was motivated by the knowledge that she would receive a financial per diem allowance and the possibility that the candidate would help her find a job if she won the election. Doreya, a widow, was also hoping that the candidate would help her by pushing forward her application for a pension for her two children, whose father died without an ID. Doreya was also hoping that she would receive a financial per diem for her all-day election observations. Although one can argue that the narrative of these two young women represents Ekman and Amna's (2012) conceptualization of manifested political participation, it is perhaps more useful to understand this example as an indirect form of formal political participation in public domain. Since this was a volunteer activity for a political party and/or a parliamentarian candidate, the young

women's civic engagement may not be affiliated with a political institution, and their action was a temporary, volunteer effort.

Example eleven: Nevine's attempt to contact a political representative

Nevine worked as an election observer for the same female candidate that Omaimia and Doreya supported. However, unlike the other two women, Nevine was motivated to serve as an election observer by her desire to help a female candidate become a member of parliament. After her candidate won, Nevine, a 22-year-old from Bright village and former *Neqdar Nesharek* participant, met with the newly-elected member of parliament to discuss a threat that endangers her village and constitutes an environmental hazard. The threats that Nevine identified were caused by the irrigation waterway that goes through the village. In three separate incidents over the last 10 years, an old woman and two children slipped and drowned in the waterway. In addition, due to the lack of a municipal sewer system, several homes dump their sewer waste into the water through a traditional sewer pipeline. Nevine proposed that the new member of parliament support "building a fence around the irrigation water passage to stop the risks posed to children. The fence would also prevent my neighbors from dumping their sewer waste in the clean water and spreading different diseases among the village." Nevine, however, quickly became frustrated. In spite of her persistence, she never heard back from the member of parliament, and all of her attempts at setting up a meeting to discuss the proposal were rejected. Nevine's act of contacting a political representative is an individual form of manifest political participation in the formal political public domain.

In addition, her volunteer time is an individual form of both social involvement and civic engagement in the public domain. (Ekman and Amna, 2012).

Example twelve: Laila, creative literacy classes

Despite low interest among illiterate men and women to enroll in literacy classes, a high dropout rate among those who do enroll, and low attainment levels from those who remain in the class, Laila has succeeded in helping others obtain the literacy certificate. The certificate that Laila helps others achieve is equal to the elementary-level in the formal education system in Egypt. Laila (the same young woman who led a volunteer initiative with three other women to build a basic wooden gangplank across the waterway in Bright village) was one of three young women that I met twice for the purposes of follow-up and clarification. Laila, who has a high school diploma, runs two literacy classes at her home for illiterate rural women in her village. Although she receives an honorarium from the Adults Education Authority for every woman who succeeds in passing the illiteracy eradication test, her decision to run the classes is completely voluntary. What is unique about Laila's curriculum is that it creatively blends content from *Neqdar Nesharek* about entrepreneurial skills, running a small business, and small income generating activities with basic literacy. Laila's classes are popular with women because of the unique combination of literacy and entrepreneurial skills content. She has found that this curriculum has also helped to increase the number of women who have attained the literacy certificate. According to Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology, Laila's innovate curriculum delivered to illiterate poor women in her village is an

example of an individual form of latent civil participation. It is also an example of both social involvement and civic engagement in the private domain.

Example thirteen: Laila, charitable donations

Laila utilizes her connections with the women who attend her literacy classes to collect used clothes and other home materials that can be redistributed to poor people in the village. Laila solicits donations in conjunction with the community development association in her village, and she then mobilizes a large number of women who volunteer to clean, iron, pack, and sell the used clothes for a mostly symbolic price. In this example, Laila's efforts could be understood within the context of Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology as an individual form of civil participation that is both social and associational involvement. This example can also be understood as a form of civic engagement in the private domain.

Compared to the other young women I interviewed for this study, Laila is exceptional in the ways in which she is actively engaged in the public life of her society. In addition to the high number of civic engagement activities she is involved in, she also understands the value of her voluntary public engagement. On my second interview with her, I was invited to see the wooden gangplank that she helped to build across the waterway. While viewing this gangplank, I asked her about what civic engagement means from her perspective. She explained:

> Civic engagement, from my perspective, is the opportunity through which you can contribute to anyone needing help by showing [others] first, that you are appreciative of their efforts and proud to be one of them; and second, to tell

> everyone that women also have things to do for their community, exactly as men's role and their role is not limited to only what is needed for the home. But I must tell you, no one sees what we [women] are doing, or they see, but they don't want to acknowledge it.

The definition of civic engagement by participants may relate to the importance of women's recognition in the community, and the invisibility of women's civic participation. This also relates to the inability of previous quantitative research (e.g. SYPE) to capture the several vivid civic engagement activities. Finally, the preceding examples of various actions carried out by women demonstrate the way young women in Fayoum are engaged in both civic and political participation activities (both latent and manifest). These activities stretch beyond voting and knowing the name of their governor. These examples also show that young women's civic and political participation is in both the public political domain and private domain.

Women's strategies

Women's, especially young women's, roles in most rural societies is mainly determined by the family and society, and in some cases, different social and religious discourses. Data from this study suggests that family and societal norms restrict women's roles to household activities, whereas any other out-of-home activities, including civic engagement, are not welcomed. In addition, families expect that women will be fully engaged in and committing all their time to their home and family. Throughout the interviews, participants' narratives reflected a general belief that maintaining the status quo is the only option expected by their families and society. While the women conformed to this expectation, they also narrated how they developed and adopted

different strategies to meet these expectations while also participating in the public life of their communities.

When I initially prepared my interview questions for this study, I did not have a prompt that directly asked what strategies the women adopted to reconcile and understand these new roles. I added this question to my interview protocol because so many participants reiterated the necessity of having strategies in place in order to better engage in public life, especially if those engagements involve time away from the family. In order to work around and with the socially constructed and family-imposed constraints, the young women needed to develop a unique form of agency. The women in this study utilized six different strategies to achieve their goals and circumvent societal norms: confrontation strategy, adaptation strategy, a mix of confrontation and adaptation strategy, submission strategy, co-optation strategy, and, as coined by the young women themselves, "fabricating strategy."

The *confrontation strategy* was the least used by study participants. Some women opted to confront their family and society to force acceptance of their new roles. Confrontation, however, frequently led to being penalized by family and society. Saleema from Hope village is an obvious example. When Saleema confronted her family and society by leading an initiative with her peers to establish their own nonprofit organization (the first women-run organization in their village), she was faced with a dilemma: her marriage or the organization. Saleema's punishment for going against the status quo, however, was getting divorced.

Participants used the *adaptation strategy* when they applied life skills learned through their participation in women's groups to their relationships with husbands, fathers, and *hammas* (mothers-in-law). The women that used this strategy found it useful for reconciling the need to be present for their families while also saving time for participation in public life. Laila, from Bright village, explained how applying this strategy helped her not only to secure the time needed to participate in several civic activities, but also to maintain a steady relationship with her mother-in-law. She explained:

> Learning how to manage my time was the greatest thing I got from my peers. I knew I had a "to do" list of household activities every day, otherwise my mother-in-law wouldn't let it go. Tactfully, I reached an agreement with my mother-in-law that I abide to all my household commitments, and when finished, I could go do some activities to help other people every once in a while. With this agreement, she has nothing do with me so long as I meet all my household commitments. And believe it or not, she has become nicer to me these days.

Other women chose to apply of *mix of the confrontation and adaptation strategies*. While some young women, like Laila, tried to avoid any confrontation with their families by preferring to adapt to the family requirements and norms, other women chose to apply a mixed strategy to meet the requirements and challenges while also compelling their families to accept their new civic role. Doreya, the widow from Bright village, participated as an election observer on behalf of a female candidate. Even though she was stationed in a polling station in the primary school of her village; Doreya's husband's family objected to her participation because they believed it to be a male-only activity. They also believed that, in light of her status as a young widow, she should not

spend the whole day out with strangers. When she informed her husband's family that she wanted to participate because she hoped the candidate would help her push through her children's pension application, her in-laws replied that she still could not go. Their rationale was that her children should not spend a whole day away from home in such a risky environment—a polling place. In her interview, Doreya said that she had to adapt to their concerns, and so she asked her neighbor to keep and watch the children until the end of the day. While the situation seemed to have found an amicable resolution, Doreya still had to confront her in-laws before she could participate as an election observer.

On the other hand, some women adopted a *submission strategy*. Women in this study who adopted this strategy were forced to submit and yield to the authority of their family (husband, father, and mother-in-law) and to the oppressive social norm of their society. Nesma, from Hope village, was forced to submit to her father's authority when he prohibited her from participating in the women's group. She was required to take her younger brother with her as an escort every time she went to meet with women in the group. Nesma abided her family's request and never went to the women's group alone. It worth noting that Nesma's abidance and submission attitude was a single case of the submission strategy and it was not found among others.

Other women used *co-optation strategy* to uphold, co-opt, or seemingly assimilate to some widely accepted social norms in order to further their desire to bend those same norms by getting out of the home and attending a women's gathering. Abeer, a 23-year-old married woman from Bright village with two children, explained that she saw her mother use this strategy five years ago when attempting to convince her husband that

Abeer should participate in the *Neqdar Nesharek* program. As she noted, "[My mother] justified to him that my participation would help me run a small business to help in my *gihaz*…Now, I apply the same strategy to get out of the home and participate in the women's group. I legitimize my participation and get their support by justifying that being in the group will teach me how to read so I can learn to read the Quran, and I can also pray and teach my children how to properly pray." Several women mentioned that they used this strategy.

Lastly, some women used *fabrication strategy*, a term that study participants selected. Some women appeared to be able to achieve their goals and participate in different civic activities by strategically deciding on what information to share or withhold from their families. Rasha, in the example of the bird flu vaccine initiative, mentioned that she fabricated a story to her husband because if she told him the full truth, she worried that he would never allow her to go, much less complain to the local council. Rasha added, "I told [my husband] I was going to vaccinate our poultry at the vet clinic, and I didn't tell him until after I finished and we all got the vaccine." Rasha believed that the only workable strategy available to her would be to withhold information from her family because if they knew what she was up to, they wouldn't let her go. It is important to note that Rasha's family, as well as the families of the other nine women that participated with her, were happy to learn about their initiative after they received positive results. In other words, it would appear that family members were willing to accept the fabrication so long as they benefitted from the end result.

Each of these identified strategies highlights how young women in this study have agency. This sense of agency is not limited to women's ability to make decisions, but also encompasses the meaning, motivation, and purpose that young women bring to their activity. Through their cognitive processes of reflection and analysis, women exercise their agency in various forms, including: bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, and confrontation and resistance. Young women exercised their agency as individuals and collectively.

Women's agency

The narratives shared by the women in this study display a collective sense of personal and collective agency. This agency is visible in the ways in which the women consciously took civic action, and in the different strategies they developed to achieve their goals while also presenting their new roles to families and society. I draw on the social cognitive theory of Bandura (2001) to construct a theoretical relationship between the social construction of the young women's roles in rural Fayoum, the women's capacity to control their lives, and their individual and collective action and agency. As Bandura posits, agency incorporates endowments, belief systems, capabilities, and distributed structures and functions through which individuals have the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of their life. Bandura extends the conception of human agency beyond direct personal agency by identifying proxy agency and collective agency.

According to Bandura, human agency is characterized by four core features that operate through phenomenal and functional consciousness: intentionality, forethought,

self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness. These core features are crucial to understanding the six strategies that I have earlier identified and discussed in this chapter. These six strategies make it possible for the young women to have a role in their own self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal. According to Bandura, *intentionality* means that action should be grounded in self-motivators at a future point of time and based on plan of actions. *Forethought* is the ability to set goals and cognitively anticipate the likelihood of consequences and future events. *Self-reactiveness* is motivation that serves as a self-regulatory process linking choices and plans to action. Finally, Bandura's conceptualization of *self-reflectiveness* represents self-consciousness and the ability to evaluate motivation, values, and the meaning of life pursuits. It also refers to the capacity for beliefs to practice a measure of control over functioning and external events.

The data in this study suggests that all participants displayed a sense of personal agency through their affiliation with different women's groups. These informal groups, through social capital, motivate women to exercise agency by being empowered to define their goals and act upon them. In addition, the interdependency between social groups and personal agency provided resources and opportunities for the personal development of young women. The narratives in the previous two chapters suggest that each of the participants present varying perspectives on the common social constraints that are experienced in their everyday lives. The young women narrated how their decision to become involved in an informal volunteer group was, in most cases, in opposition to the social norm of their family and society. Women displayed different motivations for partaking in a social network. Their ability to anticipate the outcomes and consequences

of their involvement allowed them to reorder their priorities and restructure their lives accordingly, demonstrating forethought and personal agency. Participants recounted that they maintained their social networks not only as a learning avenue, but also as a safe space to meet and deliberate about public concerns. Yet, for some, these social networks were a starting point for collective action. Saleema's NGO and Rasha's vaccine initiative are obvious examples in which young women were triggered by insurgent action to challenge the status quo.

The emancipatory context of informal social networks allowed the young women awareness that their agency and power had the capacity to deconstruct dominant power relations within their family and society. In Chapter 4, Sabreen demonstrated her personal agency as she went through a social and legal process to attain an inheritance denied to her by an older brother. Her goal was based on a mindfulness of the anticipated outcome and the likely negative consequences that she would experience as a result of her actions. Sabreen explained that the discontent of her family and society was painful, but that the outcome was fulfilling. Furthermore, most women reported a form of personal agency where they consciously utilized the life skills they gained through their social interactions in their informal groups. These skills allowed them to adopt different strategies to reconstruct decision-making structures, set by the family (husband or mother-in-law) and maintained by the society through different discourses. In most cases the women's success was gaining visibility—attaining the recognition of their family and society, and achieving the goals that could reinforce their new role.

Rasha, from Hope village, displayed agency when she chose to complain about the failure of the government's veterinary clinic to provide vaccine. Rasha set a goal and cognitively anticipated the desired outcome of her meeting with the chairman. Self-reactiveness can be found in the women's motivations, serving as a self-regulatory process linking their choices and plans to action. Rasha was able to influence two government agencies (the veterinary clinic and Local Council) to act and fix their inability to play their designated role. Rasha's agency did not end when she achieved her goal, and it also extended to her ability to reflect on the event with her peers. In this learning event, Rasha was able to evoke self-consciousness capable of evaluating motivation and judging the extent to which she had the capacity to control her environment.

Unlike Rasha, Doreya displayed a kind of proxy agency in which she sought to influence others to fight for her rights and on her behalf. Through her volunteer effort as an election observer, Doreya worked to influence the elected parliamentarian to push her children's pension application forward. Although her efforts did not result in the planned payoff, Doreya exercised one mode of agency—proxy agency.

In addition to the forms of agency demonstrated through civic activities and strategies, the women in this study also demonstrated a sense of agency at home. Although most rural women have little to do with the decision to marry (this decision is entirely taken by the head of household, usually a father or elder brother), Soha exercised her agency by making decisions related to her marriage. As discussed in Chapter 5, Soha, a 19-year-old from Dream village, was able to define her goals and act upon them. In

addition, she was able to utilize the critical thinking and problem solving skills that she acquired from her peers in her women's group. She used many available resources to reject the proposal that she marry her cousin, a match that had been approved by her family. Soha's intentional action was not just a decision to reject a marriage, but also an exercise of agency aimed at challenging and deconstructing the social norms of her society. Soha's personal agency stemmed from a belief that she was capable of exercising some measure of control over her situation.

The data in Chapters 4 and 5 explains why young women do not play a noticeable role in civic activities at the state level. The data also demonstrates that young women are extremely active participants at the local level. The young women noted that affiliation with a volunteer social network increased their sense of community and left them with the sense that they were not living their lives in isolation. This led them to realize the importance of collective agency and share a belief in collective power.

Collective efficacy happens when a group acts conjointly on a shared goal where members are responsible to cognize, aspire, motivate, and regulate their action (Bandura, 2001). Two of the civic examples by Laila above (i.e. the wooden gangplank passageway and the collection and distribution of donations with the local NGO) demonstrate that collective action of a group, and Laila's important role in inspiring and motivating other women to volunteer their time. The women that joined Laila to build a basic wooden gangplank were exercising the four core features of their human agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness. The key ingredient of their collective agency was their belief in the importance of their collective power. Laila and

her peers had a clear goal in mind and were able to anticipate not only its outcome, but also its likely consequences. While Laila and her colleagues were the initiators and planners of this civic action, they also motivated their husbands and two other men to volunteer time and labor.

Another example of women's collective agency is explained by Saleema's intention of establishing the first female-led NGO in the village. She succeeded in this endeavor, even though her marriage failed. In addition, Saleema's decision to continue working toward her goal despite the negative consequence represented by her divorce shows her ability to evaluate consequences and make decisions.

In Chapter 5, numerous examples of the skills and knowledge that women acquire through informal learning were discussed. In this chapter, I maintain that the combination of the women's agency and resources constitute what Sen (1985) refers to as capabilities. Capability, according to Sen, is the potential that young women have for living the lives they want. Resources, however, are not limited to human and social capital that women can access through their participation in a social network, but also include economic and financial resources. Denying women access to these resources (a result of maldistribution, as discussed earlier by Fraser [1998]), leads to the misrecognition of women. There is a need to understand how economic resources, agency, and recognition are significant to the study of women's empowerment, yet such questions are beyond the scope of this research.

Summary

Rural young women engage in various activities that reside outside of conventional political domains, yet they have significant capacity to enact social change. The preceding discussions highlight the relationship between social networks and civic engagement, and the examples that I have shared in this research illustrate there is a distinction between civic engagement and collective action. Civic engagement stems from individual behavior, and collective action is oriented toward group goals. While a person may be civically engaged, it does not necessarily mean that they are acting collectively. On the other hand, individual civic engagement is essential to building collective action. This study and others have found that women's casual social groups represent one form of informal civil society and are free schools of democracy where women's affiliation with these networks is a form of civic engagement. Additionally, the young women in this study recounted that their discussions within these personal groups were a form of engagement in public life. In numerous ways, the women in this study shared how their spontaneous conversations were evidence not only of civic engagement, but also of democracy in action.

The data in this chapter suggests that women do not make public engagement decisions in a traditional sense of political engagement or a theoretical sense of this term, but rather, through every day social interactions. Furthermore, the young women noted that they were deeply affected by being denied the ability to make strategic life choices. The preceding discussion and narratives demonstrate how both formal and informal women's groups make significant contributions to the extent to which participants

believed they could take action. The narratives presented here also suggest that women's agency is developed alongside of their empowerment. In addition, the young women in this study illustrated how participation in volunteer social networks and civic action provided the skills needed to achieve recognition and empowerment.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This chapter provides an overall all analysis of the findings with necessary theorization in relation to the posed research questions. The aim of this chapter is to reveal how young women in rural Fayoum understand their participation in informal social networks and what role do these networks play to advance their civic and political participation. In doing so, I divided the chapter into five sections. In the first section, I provide a brief analysis and discussion for the three data chapters followed by a discussion on women's civic engagement and mainstream views of civic engagement in Egypt. This discussion is important in answering the research question number four—how do the experiences of young women compare with mainstream accounts of civic participation in Egypt. The second section provides detailed discussion on the findings of this study. The third section is devoted to discussing the implications of the study for scholarship in comparative education and international development studies as well as for development and education policies. In section four, I highlight possible future directions for research. The last section, concludes with the significance of the study. Finally, this concluding chapter is addressing the question I posed earlier in the outset of this dissertation on why do young women in rural Egypt, who are generally not engaged in public life, tend to participate more in civic activities in their society when they affiliate with a social network?

Introduction

The preceding discussions highlight the inability of quantitative models and theories of political behavior and engagement to explain how some social groups

participate actively in civic life beyond the classic individual characteristics of educational and economic status. While the focus of those rational models (e.g., SES) is on the individuals' level of education and income to predict their engagement, they neglect people's unconventional agency to transform their low socioeconomic status and other forms of exclusion into a catalyst for greater civic engagement when they come together. Furthermore, those rational models emphasize educational attainment, income, and the acquisition of resources and skills as predictors of the level of participation; however, these variables fail to explain how individuals, especially those from less-advantaged groups, acquire such skills and resources. Research in the field of civic engagement exploring the experiences of rural young women tends to be informed by rational, political models and employs classical frameworks such as Tocqueville's (1838) indicators to predict participation in formal political events. With few exceptions (e.g. the work of International Civic and Citizenship Education Study - ICCS), this study has shown how these classical, rational models fall short to explain the importance of understanding the acts of young women's everyday lives as an unconventional form of participation. Furthermore, this body of existing research relies on the SES model and tends to connect public participation to predictors such as levels of educational attainment, as defined by traditional schooling models. The focus of the SES model on traditional schooling as one of its major determinants of public participation contributes to the paucity of scholarship on other forms of education and may not provide leverage to the contribution of informal learning to public participation. By relying on SES models, scholars have perhaps underestimated the influence that informal learning has on public

participation. As this study has shown, in practice, public participation is more dynamic and complex than previous models have suggested.

This study does not downplay the importance of individual characteristics, nor does it discard the strong theoretical grounding offered through SES Models; rather, this study shows that these models should be troubled and problematized. This research aimed to expand current debates about informal and unconventional participation theories and the attendant methodological considerations that emerge when attempting to understand ways of learning and participation that are less visible. This study improves our understanding of how less-advantaged young women become engaged in civic life and how they acquire skills and resources to advance their participation.

One of the primary findings of this study is that spontaneous discussion, as a part of women's social networks and interaction, is one of the ways in which less-advantaged young women can acquire the skills, resources, and motivation necessary for effective civic and political participation. The goal of this study was to advance an understanding of how less-advantaged young women in rural Egypt utilize the experiences of their individually constructed social networks in developing their civic and political participation. In doing so, I posed an overarching research question to guide this study: how do young women understand their participation in informal, social networks to advance their civic and political participation in rural Egypt? The study generated a deeper and richer understanding of the pedagogical nature of informal social networks in fostering civic learning of young women. This study extended previous research by

connecting theories of situated and cognitive learning and social capital, as well as by broadening the contexts in which women's social interaction and discussion were studied.

Finally, this dissertation reveals how young women in rural Fayoum understand and conceptualize their participation in self-created informal social networks and what role do these networks play to advance their civic and political participation. Women's narratives in the three data chapters together with the following concluding discussion attempts to uncover the ambiguity of why young women in rural Egypt, who are generally not engaged in public life, tend to participate more in civic activities in their society when they affiliate with a social network. A plausible answer provided by the women themselves; in addition to the knowledge and skills they gain through their networks that help them develop sense of agency, women emphasized the opportunity to get out of the house and how it relates to be politically active. In this sense, getting out of the house seems to refer to a growing mobility or possibility simply to be in "public spaces".

In the remaining of this chapter, I include a summary of the previous analysis from these chapters. After this summary analysis, I briefly revisit the key findings and examine their implications for scholarship in comparative education and international development studies as well as for development and education policies. Finally, I conclude with the significance of the study and future directions for research.

Paradoxical discourses

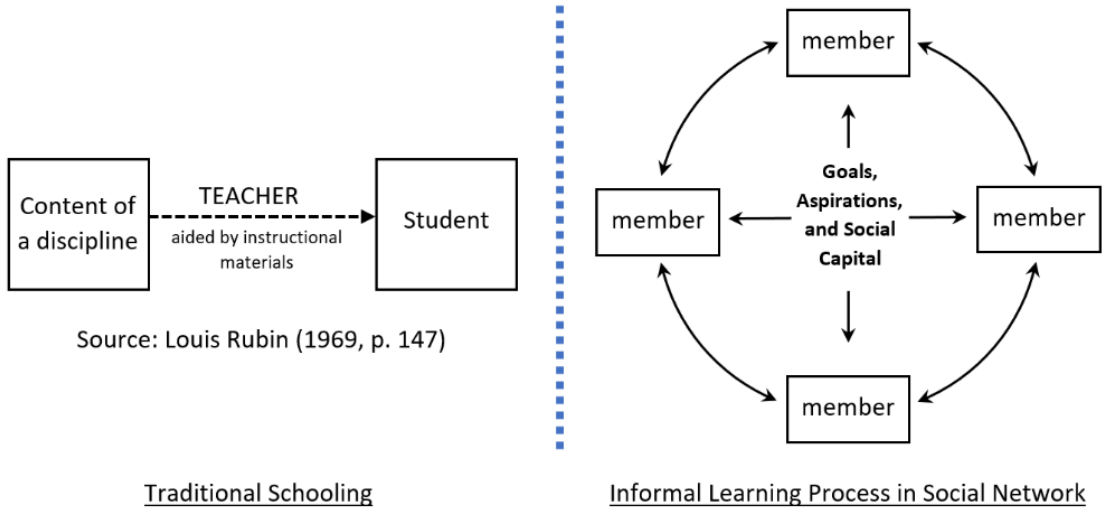
In Chapter 4, I discussed women's recounts on how collective identity is established and how the social roles and identities of young rural women in Fayoum are constructed. The chapter illustrated the competing discourses that affect and constrain the participation of young women in civic life. Women's recounts on these discourses answer the first research question—how they understand the social and political issues that impact their lives and identities within their communities. Young women classified these discourses into two major areas: constraining and encouraging discourses. Young women demonstrated how they are affected by being labeled as "rural women," a factor which I needed to grapple with as I also unintentionally used this discourse in reference to the participants of this study. The data suggested that young women in rural Fayoum are expected to conform to these discourses and accept what the label of "rural women" means. Some of these discourses stem from the historical tension between residents of Fayoum and the successive military regimes in Egypt, while others are informed by policy interpretations of statistical data on "rural women's" political participation. These discourses are important for understanding women's decision not to participate in political affairs especially those sponsored by the state; however, as this study has illustrated, these previous studies that concluded low participation of rural women were conducted in ways that did not allow for the possibility that the actions taken by women in their everyday lives constitute a form of participation and resistance. In fact, the data suggest that even this intended decision by rural women not to participate in state civic activities is a form of latent participation in the public political domain.

Avenues of learning: pedagogical pathways to civic engagement

In Chapter 5, I demonstrated how women's conceptualization of their individually constructed, informal social networks served as avenues of learning. In these informal networks, young women interact, generate social capital, and acquire the knowledge and skills needed for both participation in the civic life of their communities and for gaining the recognition of their family and society. Women's narratives suggested a distinction between their informal civic learning and traditional schooling as depicted in Figure 7.1 below.

Young women teach and learn from each other without a teacher as in formal education and without a facilitator or a trainer as in non-formal education. They learn spontaneously from their interaction within their self-created groups as a form of experience-based learning. In such learning process, there is no learner/teacher relationship; rather, there is old-timer/new-comer type of relation as contended by Lave and Wenger (1991) in their situated learning theory. With the absence of a mediator (i.e. teacher, trainer), women learn about civic knowledge and skills as a byproduct of their interaction and discussion. Unlike conventional learning curriculum, learning curriculum in women's informal learning is a field of learning resources in women's everyday practice and consists of women's goals, aspirations, and social capital as depicted in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1 – Difference Between Women's Informal Learning and Traditional Schooling



Women set their learning goal and they get inspired by their peers to achieve their goals. Nesma from Hope village (see Chapter 5) is one of several women who were self-directed to learn about basic civics. Nesma's aspiration to learn about politics and civics was inspired by her desire to join the discussion with her peers who used to talk a lot about politics as a result of the political uprising in Egypt and several other countries in the region. Social capital facilitated Nesma's aspiration to acquaint herself with some basic knowledge in order to engage with her group where she drew on the human capital—knowledge and expertise—of her peer within the network. Although human capital and social capital are not the same thing, the production of social capital in recurring patterns of interaction and relationships between Nesma and her peers facilitated her utilization of this knowledge and expertise as human capital and social

capital are interrelated (Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). This conceptualization also shows the relation between personal development (e.g. Nesma's case) and agency.

Bandura (2001) affirms the necessity of interdependency between social groups, personal agency, and personal development by noting, "Personal agency and social structure operate interdependently. [Where] social structures are created by human activity, and socio-structural practices, in turn,…provide enabling resources and opportunity structures for personal development" (p. 15). Through these avenues, young women are not only learning implicit civic knowledge in order to participate civically, but they are also learning the skills necessary for initiating effective decision making while also maintaining healthy relationships with their mother-in-law and husband. One of the primary themes presented in this study is a possible explanation for how women learn informally through spontaneous discussions, which leads to civic action (*Figure 5.2*). Chapter 5 provides reflection on how women's informal learning through their informal groups, as avenues of participation, supports many of the themes found in Chapter 2 on informal learning, social capital, and informal avenues of participation. Young women's recounts highlight the significance of spontaneous conversations about their experiences on their learning. Prominent theorists of human learning and development such as Dewey (1938), Lewin (1947), Vygotsky (1978) and, more recently, Lave and Wenger (1991), have given a central role to experience and conversation in their theories of situated learning. According to Lave and Wenger, learning is a matter of creating meaning and constructing knowledge from the real activities of everyday lives. In addition, Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) highlight the role of social networks as

avenues of learning because they have the ability to facilitate collaborative learning. From their perspective, individuals participate consciously in a "social network within the culture helps them develop its language and the belief systems and promote the process of enculturation" (p. 39). Ola's example (see Chapter 5) on learning how she expresses her opinion and learn about election mechanism aligns with this process of enculturation. In addition, learning through social interaction aligns with the contention of Lave and Wenger (1991) that informal learning is a socio-cultural phenomenon, not the action of an individual acquiring general information. For the participants in this study, informal learning is a means to acquire information and relate it to needs and concerns faced by the larger culture. As Vygotsky (1978) has noted, culture deeply maintains, influences, and shapes the activities and learning of individuals. Finally, as I noted in Chapter 5, a significant portion of the participants' learning journeys were determined by the extent to which they had the possibility to enact their new civic roles in their families and society. In Chapter 6, I theorized that these enactments constitute a kind of agency and public recognition.

Women's "invisible" civic engagement

Chapter 6 illustrates how the young women in this study take what they have learned in their informal social networks and apply it to the real world. The chapter also furthers the argument that the prevailing political and public participation models fall short in their capacity to predict and explain women's unconventional political participation and engagement. Women's vivid civic examples introduced in Chapter 6 highlight the failure of these prevailing models to provide insight into how some social

groups (e.g. young women acting within individually constructed, social networks) participate at much higher rates than others. These models also fall short when considering questions of how some young women become engaged and active in political and civic life while others with similar individual characteristics do not. The vivid examples of civic engagement shared by participants of this study highlight women's active engagement not only in the private civic domain but also in the political national domain. Chapter 6 highlights how participants developed sense of personal and collective agency that could be leveraged for making strategic life choices with long-term consequences. The narratives found in Chapter 6 also provide evidence of the value that the young women placed on their agency and ability to choose the kinds and types of relationships that they wanted to have with their family and society, and have a distinct bearing on their behavior and the choices that they made.

Women's practices and mainstream views of civic engagement in Egypt

The analysis shows how women's civic engagement as they narrated in the several examples in the previous data chapters on one hand align with definitions of civic and political participation; and, on the other hand, differs from mainstream views of civic engagement in Egypt. SES model, as discussed in Chapter 1, is used to assess women's civic engagement in Egypt. There are two conflicting dominant views that identify women's civic engagement and political participation in Egypt. The first view is constructed and perpetuated by the media and scholars from various disciplines and the second is labeled by statisticians and national surveys (e.g., SYPE). On the one hand, media reports and scholars claim that women in Egypt are becoming active players in

civic and democratic processes and are playing a noticeably larger role than ever before (Ibrahim, 2013; LaGraffe, 2012; Snider & Faris, 2011). This view centers on the significant political change since the political uprising that occurred in January 25, 2011, which has been referred to as the "Arab Spring" in Egypt and other countries in the region, and the following waves of political participation especially among women. While this view is mainly addressing political activists in urban cities in Egypt, it does not represent young women in rural communities. On the other hand, statisticians report that civic engagement among Egyptian women in general and rural young women ages 15 to 25, in particular, is low. According to proponents of this view, only 1.5% of rural young women participate in any civic or political activities (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). Statisticians in the latter view employed SES and other quantitative indicators to assess civic engagement of young women. An example of these indicators is whether they know the name of their governor, which was a question from the Survey of Young People in Egypt (SYPE), another example was if they affiliated to any political institutions. The two main views gauged women's civic engagement discretely through their political participation in state sponsored activities. However, young women in Fayoum who demonstrated numerous vivid examples of civic engagement in local activities, felt discriminated against, as these mainstream views do not capture their local public involvement. Yet, none of these young women, who I interviewed through this study, neither know the name of the governor nor affiliated to any political institutions.

The findings of this study reveal there is a discrepancy between what was narrated by women and what has been concluded and presumed by SYPE, *Neqdar Neshrek*

reports, and other related publications. One example is the discrepancy between young women's motives and objectives for joining the *Neqdar Nesharek* program and the program's objectives for these young women, as discussed earlier. Additionally, there is difference in perception about learning between young women and the designers of *Neqdar Nesharek* program. While *Neqdar Nesharek* documents and the comments of team members reveal that learning is perceived ultimately as "learning to earn," the young women in Fayoum perceive learning as "learning to live." Another discrepancy is in the level of engagement of young women, which is mainly due to the various discourses surrounding women in rural Fayoum. This discrepancy indicates a methodological failure on the part of SYPE to employ a method that is conducive to viewing the experiences of rural women from their perspective instead of from the perspective of the designer of the questionnaire. While the interview process captures rich and descriptive narratives that are useful for deepening our understanding of women's everyday lived experiences, the preset of questions of SYPE questionnaire failed to capture the facts of the lived experiences of young women, as well as the essence of these experiences.

One example of the failure to capture the facts of the lived experiences of young women and the essence of these experiences is SYPE's attempt to assess civic participation of women through their voting turnout. By reducing civic and political participation to voting in public elections (i.e., parliamentary, presidential, and referendums), other forms of actual civic and political participation activities practiced by women that are not captured by the SYPE questionnaire are neglected. In addition, during

the interviews, as discussed earlier in Chapter 4, women bluntly mentioned several reasons for their intentional decision to boycott elections (e.g., hostile relationship with the successive military regimes, election fraud, and lack of national IDs). As argued by Bernard (2011), as well as by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), investigating a phenomenon about which little is known requires appropriate research methods that allow the researcher to examine a specific situation within a particular context.

When examining the situation within its context, the decision by women to boycott public elections is a mode of engagement and could even be seen as an act of civic and political participation undetected by SYPE. Ekman and Amna (2012) contend that boycotting is, in fact, a form of "latent participation," which constitutes a mode of civic and political engagement. They argue that civic engagement is a wide concept, which includes political participation. Ekman and Amna's argument shows that the concept of political participation, as employed by SYPE, is too narrow in scope and overly relies on standard definitions of political participation, such as voter turnout and affiliation with political parties. As I mentioned in Chapter 3 of this study in the methodological considerations, I asked each woman participant the following yes/no question at the end of their interview: "Do you know the name of the governor of Fayoum?" I deliberately asked this question, which was one of the questions on the SYPE questionnaire, to contrast the findings of this qualitative study about the civic participation of women to those of SYPE. Interestingly, all of the women answered *no* to this question, yet demonstrated numerous vivid examples of civic and political

participation. This suggests that questions that aim to assess formal civic knowledge are, on their own, not accurate measures of civic participation.

Furthermore, research must not overlook that the low rate of participation in state's sponsored civic activities and "invisible engagement" of women in Hope, Dream and Bright Villages in rural Fayoum, as measured by national surveys and narrated by women, is a reflection of socially constructed gender roles and identities rather than the personal choices and convictions of young women. The above discussion shows how issues like undocumented marriage, lack of national IDs, poor economic opportunities and migration of husbands coupled with social norms that limit the mobility of young women are all factors that lead to low visibility of the participation of rural women. Studies that fail to address this reality within rural communities contribute to the marginalization of rural women, as the women themselves explained above. Abu-Lughod (2010) criticizes the few studies on women's participation for their heavy reliance on SES and Tocqueville's (1838) indicators (e.g., voter turnout) rather than on careful examination of the everyday lives of rural women. Those studies are narrow in scope and are not able to capture how young women practice citizenship through other forms of informal participation. In addition, the discourse on women's public participation is informed mainly by studies that examine political socialization and study the behavior of discrete individuals by quantifying their participation (e.g., number of volunteering hours in civil and political institutions). However, as discussed in chapter one, Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) argue that this tradition tends to cut individuals off from their social context and networks of social interaction where their engagement and

behavior can best be understood. In addition, these quantitative surveys use the same global concepts (e.g., volunteering) as indicative of engagement of young women at national level with disrespect of the difference between metropolitan and rural contexts as discussed in Chapter 1. This tradition of "globalized localism" as coined by de Sousa Santos (2006) is also contribution the discrimination and oppression of rural young women. Consistent with Abu-Lughod's (2010) plea for ethnography to better understand the dynamic of the everyday social lives of women in rural Egypt, the narratives recounted by the young women of Fayoum revealed that there is a great need for a methodology that considers their context and better captures their actual participation.

In conclusion, the mainstream views of civic engagement in Egypt is dominated by SES and Tocquevillian indicators and may not capture the civic and political participation of young women in rural Fayoum. While women in Fayoum decided not to participate in state's civic activities for several socioeconomic, political, and historical factors, their vivid civic and political participation examples indicate that they are involved in civic and political actions in both private and public political domains in Egypt. Failure of quantitative research to capture this involvement may contribute to the discrimination against rural young women.

Summary of key findings

This section summarizes the key findings of the previous three data chapters to extend the scholarship on women civic and political participation. The following findings, therefore, contribute to and affirm the larger research on women's civic participation and informal civic learning.

Women's social interactions within informal, voluntary social networks generate social capital that facilitates informal learning. The young women recounted that their social interaction with each other within their individually constructed social networks promoted their sense of belonging and community, which in turn facilitated the creation of a form of bonding with others. This finding affirms Coleman's (1988) theory that social capital is a byproduct resource of social interaction that exists in social relations and that individuals may tap into it as a result of their social relations (see, for example, Amira, Sabreen and Doreya's narratives from Chapter 4, and Reda and Soha's from Chapter 5). But is also distinct from Coleman's theory in that it exists outside of formal institutions such as schools, and it may be more important in informal settings when institutions do not serve the needs of women. This study suggests that one of the practical implications that stems from discussion of public and social issues is informal learning. Social networks are a structure that serves as a vehicle through which young women can be connected to knowledge, skills, and available resources. This finding offers support to Foley's (1999) argument that information and knowledge sharing facilitates women's informal learning where "learning occurs informally and incidentally, in people's everyday lives" (p. 95). Traditional learning, such as formal schooling, can occur in abstract and decontextualized experiences; however, this study has found that unlike these traditional structures, women's informal learning takes place through relationships and interactions. This study also finds that these informal groups are well-situated to provide women with ways to tap into their prior knowledge and experiences, which can lead to opportunities to critique and challenge the social injustice of their societies. Learning of young women of this study, therefore, is contextual. This finding bolsters

Lave and Wenger's (1991) argument that women's informal groups are sites of authentic informal learning. Within a network, young women feel psychologically safe to converse, share experiences, practice, teach and learn from each other where conversation itself is a social action. For some shy, young women within these networks, learning occurred through their legitimate, peripheral participation in the network as theorized by Lave and Wenger. While shy, young women may not have direct involvement in the activity, they learn a great deal through observation from their legitimate position in the periphery (see Ola's example in Chapter 5). Group homogeneity, in sex, economic level, and somewhat age, is crucial for nurturing this sense of psychological safety, where women, especially those in the periphery (e.g. those who are shy or unable to have direct involvement), integrate opportunities to practice and learn from their conversations and experience by sharing, observing and reflecting (Vygostky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In addition, this finding also supports the work of Singerman (1995), Wedeen (2008) Bayat (2010) and Pandya (2010) on how people utilized unconventional avenues to learn and advance their involvement in public life.

Participants of this study perceived learning in ways that are inconsistent with how learning tends to be understood by education program designers. For example, the program designers of *Neqdar Nesharek* perceived that the young women would learn entrepreneurial skills to earn; however, young women tended to see it as a space where they could learn how to live (see, for example Amina's narrative from Chapter 4). The narrative shows that the opportunity that women got to get out of the house to learn allowed them the chance, as women themselves conceptualize, to be politically active. In

this sense, getting out of the house seems to refer to a growing mobility or possibility simply for women to be in “public spaces”. This finding confirms previous research in adult literacy programs for rural women in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal by Rogers (2000) where women utilized literacy classes as a legitimate reason to come together, away from their homes.

The women’s individually constructed social networks serve as a community of practice where young women contextually learned the value of being members of a society. The symbolic election event organized and conducted by young women to choose between different options (see, for example Ola’s voting example in Chapter 5) mirrored the actual election process in the society, which confirms that the women’s group could be a space for civic engagement, mimicking the larger society. Informal social networks, therefore, are the intersection between the young women and their larger society. The finding is consistent with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory and it adds to previous research by Lake and Huckfeldt (1998), Richardson (2003), and Wedeen (2008) documenting connections between civic and citizenship education and engagement. This finding, that informal social networks serve as an intersection between young women and their larger society, is key to the argument I am building here: that young women learn about the civic attitudes and behaviors of their society through the recurring discussion that takes place in their everyday interactions within their networks. Furthermore, this finding adds support to Schugurensky’s (2000) taxonomy of informal learning (see, for example, Ola’s learning example in Chapter 5). According to this

taxonomy, young women unintentionally internalize values, attitudes, behaviors, and skills during their everyday interaction within social network as agents of socialization.

Informal civic learning, gained through affiliation within a social network, prompts young women to initiate and participate in various civic activities in their society. Through social relationships and interaction within a network, young women become acquainted and updated with public life, which in turn helps develop some level of engagement in public affairs. This finding bolsters the argument of Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) that once individuals are engaged in the civic and public life of their society, their participation follows. Women's informal social networks foster civic and political participation by providing access to skills and resources, stimulating interest in civic life. This is also in line with Putnam's (1993) argument that networks are resources and avenues to access other resources and attain a more horizontal relationship with other individuals. These horizontal relationships are conduits for civic and political participation.

The data in this study suggests that cost of participation may be even greater for women, as suggested by examples from these women, which presents an interesting paradox. First, the literature review in Chapter 2 shows the importance of politically relevant social capital to reducing the cost of participation as it provides the civic knowledge and skills required to motivate civic and political participation (Downs, 1957; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). Second, literature on the cost of participation from the field of political participation does not distinguish between men and women's cost of participation. This study shows a discrepancy between the existing literature and what

participants portrayed, as women. The cost of participation for women is not limited to the time and effort required by an individual to learn about politics in order to make informed decisions (Downs, 1957), but it also includes what I have termed as the "*opportunity cost of women's participation*." In patriarchal authoritative societies, the socially constructed gender roles may add other aspects to the cost of participation for women: Saleema's divorce case (Chapter 6) serves as one example. This finding was robust across interviews for almost all of the women, and it brings to the surface more questions for future research and refinement.

Rural, young women's participation is not only restricted to their civic engagement in the private domain, but also included in public participation in the political domain. In contrast to the results of classical, political research that tends to rely on Tocquevillian indicators and SES determinants to assess women's public participation, this study found that young women participate civically and politically in private and public domains in unconventional ways. Women's unconventional participation presents an interesting paradox: on the one hand, the finding is consistent with Ekman and Amna's (2012) assertion that "citizens are still much interested in politics, informed, skilled, and have political efficacy beliefs. But for the time being, many of them chose not to take part in politics in a conventional sense" (p. 297); however, on the other, it mirrors the contention that rural, young women do not participate in state sponsored civic and political activities. In fact, women's conscious decision to boycott state political activities (e.g. elections) is, according to Ekman and Amna's typology, a form of latent political participation. Omaima and Doreya's

participation in parliamentary election observations (Chapter 6) and Nevine's attempts to contact her political representative (Chapter 6) represent additional examples of women's manifested political participation in the public domain.

Life skills have direct and indirect links to women's civic and political participation. The data suggested two sources where young women acquired their life skills: through their participation with development programs (e.g. *Neqdar Nesharek*) and through their social interaction within their individually constructed social networks. The direct link is represented by those life skills women learned that are also seen as civic skills, such as: time management, communication, critical thinking and problem solving. The implication of this finding is consistent with the study by Kirlin (2003) that highlighted the role of similar civic skills in fostering civic and political participation. Yet this dissertation also shows there are indirect links between other life skills such as cooking, childrearing, and sexuality and greater civic engagement and political participation. Young women recounted they intentionally employed these skills to control their environment and recognized the need for emancipation from social and family oppression. This finding conforms to the conceptualization of redistribution and recognition by Fraser (1999) that provides a useful analysis of the link between life skills and the public participation of young women. From Fraser's perspective, life skills are the catalyst for women to gain recognition and become civically engaged in their society (see various examples in Chapters 5 and 6).

Young women learn from their civic action how to transform the status quo. Conversely, civic engagement helps women band together in collective action (see, for

example, Rasha and her peers' vaccine initiative in Chapter 5 and Saleema's NGO example in Chapter 6). This finding is consistent with the argument by Fukuyama (2000) that in authoritarian contexts informal social structures help people come together and gain power needed to organize, support collective needs, and defend their interests. This finding also points to a complex interpretation of civic engagement and collective civic action. Young women engage individually and collectively to address issues they and their communities face. While the terms "civic engagement" and "collective civic action" are frequently used interchangeably by most scholars, the data suggests that women's civic engagement is not at all similar to their civic collective action. This finding is consistent with Lake and Huckfeldt's (1998) assertion on the difference between individual civic engagement and collective action. They contend that civic engagement stems from individual behavior, but that collective action is oriented toward group goals. Individual civic engagement, however, may provide opportunities to participate in larger collective action.

Women's civic and collective actions are not agentic in and of themselves; rather, they are a consequence of personal and collective agency. This finding points to the intentionality of women's civic and collective action. Women's involvement in the civic life of their society, therefore, is not a random or incidental act; rather, it is a conscious act and consequence of their agency. Furthermore, this finding is consistent with Bandura's (2001) argument that planning agency can be used to produce preferred outcomes. In addition, the data suggests that women's agency is developed through individually constructed social networks: women are empowered through interactions

with their peers. It is important to note, however, that agency alone does not ensure women's ability to exercise strategic life choices. There is a need however, to consider agency as a part of resources. Resources, as defined broadly by Fraser (1999), include the access and future claims to material and human and social resources that women need to gain recognition. This presents yet another area for future research and refinement.

The study did not find significant differences represented in countering view of civic engagement, social networks and social capital between young women who are former participants of the *Neqdar Nesharek* program and those who didn't attend the *Neqdar Nesharek*. However, young women emphasized the impact of the program in providing them the opportunity first, to get out of the house, and second meet with other young women that help build companionship. In addition, women's highlighted the role of discussions facilitated by the program in stimulating their realization about community problems and possible solutions. Rasha's narrative in Chapter 4 on how she realized the magnitude of the problem of women without national ID through her participation with the *Neqdar Nesharek* is one example. Rasha realized that lack of IDs in her village is one of the constraints that prevent women from participation in some public activities. Rasha indicated also to the program when she decided to take civic action to help those women obtain national ID. This difference may indicate that participation in the program may helped those who participated to realize the constraints and figure solutions. Nevertheless, both participants and non-participants of the program utilized their self-created groups to develop capacity to engage in a self-realization of the social and cultural injustices and the distinctive characteristics assigned to them as a form of

misrecognition. Finally, one issue that may be seen as a difference between former participants and non-participant, as contended by most former participants, is the opportunity to get out of the house. Young women emphasized the opportunity of participating in the program in association to a greater political involvement than those who didn't have the same opportunity. Women perceived the opportunity of getting out of the house, enjoying growing mobility and possibility to be in "public spaces" as being politically active.

Finally, for these women, civic and political participation may not be purely motivated by the desire to contribute to the public benefit; rather, in some cases it may be driven by private gain. The data in this study suggests different motives prompted women's civic and political participation (see, for example, Iman's voting bribe in Chapter 4 and Omaima's election observation in Chapter 6). Omaima's civic engagement was motivated by a financial per diem and the hope that the candidate may help her find a job if she won. Iman voted for a particular candidate in the public election in return for twenty Egyptian pounds and other commodities. This finding points to the need for a more complex interpretation of these civic acts that maybe seen as ineffective practices of citizenship. It also points to another way in which the SES model does not fully capture public participation. While the SES model shows that the income level is a major determinant of public participation, Omaima and Iman's narratives illustrate how participation can be prompted by their low-income status; and they, in contrast to the notion of the SES model, prompted to participate in two different manifested political acts to make money not because they are well off.

Implications

The study has many implications for educational and political research. In addition to furthering current theoretical debates in comparative education and international development, it makes significant contribution to the areas of gender and women's studies, public participation inquiry, and education and development policy. This may be the first empirical study exploring the civic practices of less-advantaged young women in the context of the MENA region of rural Egypt. This study, therefore, contributes greatly to a limited body of literature focused on rural young women and civic engagement. Specifically, by using qualitative analyses and a diverse group of participants living in three low-income, rural villages in Egypt, this study develops a better understanding of the processes involved in promoting civic and political participation.

Despite the plethora of recent research and scholarship on public participation, there has been little, if any, specific theoretical work that focuses on less-advantaged, rural, young women who are between 18- and 25-years-old. This study furthers a greater understanding of the ways these young women engage in various forms of civic life and effectively engage in their communities. The study also turns the focus of citizen participation away from classical, formal Tocquevillian understandings to the unconventional avenues of participation that have remained outside of the scope of much research.

The study uniquely bridges adult learning theories and theories of socialization and political participation. As is the case with many adult learners, the women in this

study use experience as a resource for learning. This informal learning takes many forms: self-directed, incidentally, or through socialization where discussion as a general adult learning principle certainly applies. As is the case in developmental adult learning, the participants showed their readiness and motivation to lead their learning about civics in the context of individually constructed social networks. Conversely, according to the field of political science, individuals learn about socialization through discussion with parents, teachers, and peers in an open classroom climate (Haha, 2010). From this perspective, the context in which the discussion takes place may have less influence on expected civic engagement and collective action. This study offers a different conceptualization of individually constructed social networks, as informal form of civil society, by positing they are not only avenues of learning and socialization, but also sites of civic engagement and action.

This dissertation contributes to available literature by demonstrating how women's informal groups, as individually constructed volunteer social networks, play significant educational and developmental roles for less-advantaged young women. While education and policy makers' decisions are hampered by the limited information available to them about this unconventional form of social structure, that is usually invisible and hard to examine as it is exclusive for women and it often takes place at young women's homes and on rotating basis, this dissertation provides visibility and makes a significant contribution to education and development policy debates on women of this age group and their participation in everyday public life.

Furthermore, this study advances current debates in comparative education and international development studies that have attempted to construct theories about rural young women of a specific age group. This study addressed gaps in existing literature and the lack of scholarship aimed at understanding the acts of everyday lives of young women in local, rural communities in the Arab region and how they practice citizenship. The findings of this study respond to Abu-Lughod's (2010) plea for more ethnographic research on informal participation and everyday lives of rural young women. This dissertation, through its ethnographic methods, provides new understandings about how less-advantaged young women acquire knowledge and skills through their social interactions within self-created social networks and how they utilize such knowledge and skills to advance their civic and political participation. In addition, the findings advance our understanding of the everyday acts of women's lives as a form of participation and resistance that is seldom acknowledged in different schools of thought concerned with public participation. Furthermore, the methodological considerations of this study provide a beginning place for the examination of civic and political participation as a social phenomenon of rural women of this age group in this region. The methodology facilitates reflection on the lived experiences of young women in local societies by examining and uncovering how they manifest their civic activities based on their social contexts. The outcome of this methodology advances current policy debates and will benefit future research in comparative education and international development studies.

Another significant contribution of this study is that it shows how inclusion in one's community is critical for less-advantaged, rural women. Inclusion may be a

prerequisite in some forms for civic engagement or at least facilitative for such participation as argued by DeJaeghere (2017). It is important, therefore, that development program might focus more on these outcomes of inclusion than on the economic outcomes of earning as participants of this study recount on their experiences with the *Neqdar Nesharek* program.

Finally, the findings of this study provide several implications to theory and the practice of the field of international development, specifically as they relate to adjacent research related to women's studies, gender equality, and empowering women. Policy makers at the national and international level of governments, donor agencies, and multilateral and intergovernmental organizations need to examine women's social, educational, political, and economic issues. Over the last three decades, issues related to gender equality and the empowerment of women has come to the forefront of development agendas and research in the international development field. While decision- and policy-making rely heavily on data extracted through quantitative approaches, such methodological approaches fail to capture less measurable manifestations of women's agency and other aspects of material, human, and social resources that are significant to empowering women, especially those in rural communities. This study offers an epistemological framework that may make it possible for policy makers to break out of familiar conceptual territory and move into a space where they can imagine the application of different measures capable of understanding the power imbalance and social injustice faced by rural women. While policy makers' decisions are usually based on traditional cause and effect of their interdivisions, this

epistemology offers them a distinct way to consider other unspoken benefits of their development interventions especially with marginalized rural young women. Development programs unintendedly offer opportunity for young women to get out to the public sphere and chance to informally create virtual networks. Such informal social networks created by women themselves as a by-product of their involvement in development programs. These self-created networks, as seen by women, offer women a safe space that is not found in other areas of their lives. As the findings of this study show, these by-product of development programs facilitate a form of informal civic learning; informal learning as such is potent, and a risk worth taking by educational and development policy makers.

Such an approach may help to encourage policy makers to embrace other, less conventional, data sources. Furthermore, the multiplying effects of the epistemological stance of this study, may facilitate the way policy makers might be able to see opportunities for the empowerment of women through unconventional means. In order to achieve these goals, however, policy makers must be willing to engage in unconventional policy discourses that displace the reliance on measuring empowerment through comparisons between locations over time or the assessment of the impact of specific interventions (Kabeer, 1999). The young women living in the three villages of this study demonstrated how their individually constructed, informal social networks provided them with the social capital needed to access knowledge, resources, and skills. As a result, the young women demonstrated how the development of collective agency not only achieved strategic goals and public recognition, but also fulfilled unmet basic services.

Future directions for research

Throughout this study I have laid some foundations for future research to examine civic and political participation beyond the conventional civic and political activities aimed at less-advantaged groups in developing democracies around the globe. This is an essential research area that is lacking. In Chapter 5, I discussed how a member of more than one social network could play an intersectional role to extend the knowledge and skills gained from one network to benefit other members in a different network (see *Figure 5.1.* Group intersection and overlap). In Chapter 5, I explained how Nabila, a member of three different women's social networks, including *Neqdar Nesharek,* was able to share the knowledge and skills she learned in one network with members of the other two social groups. This finding is consistent with the theory of intersecting social circles posited by Simmel (1971) who argues that an individual in different informal social groups may play various social roles and personalities while also maintaining the overlaps and intersections between these social groups. The findings of this study also support the value of further exploration on the intersections between the individually constructed social networks of young women and other conventional networks existing as an established part of the fabric of the society (e.g. religious institutions, community based organizations).

The study focused heavily on examining the social and educational role of women's individually constructed social networks in relation to their civic and political participation. This study was limited in focus on the economic aspect of these networks. Although economic aspects are of great potential for women's roles and recognition, they

are beyond the scope of my dissertation. The young women in this study recounted several examples that indicated the role of their social networks on different economic aspects, including: entrepreneurial skills, budgeting skills, and even securing jobs (see, for example, Mona's first aid and paramedic example in Chapter 5). Mona explained how she learned about the first aid training through a discussion she had with her peers in a social network. This network and training allowed her the capacity to work as a paramedic, which has played a significant role in the ways that Mona is recognized by her family and community for her work. This conforms to Fraser's (1999) argument that work is not just a way for young women to earn their living, but it also is a sphere of life where they experience recognition. There is a need, therefore, for further research to advance our understanding about economic aspects of informal social networks.

The narratives and analysis in the previous three chapters illustrate how the interactions that happen in individually constructed personal networks are effective avenues of learning. Young women learn informally from their interaction and experiences. The women explained how this learning is transformative and led them to challenge their own assumptions and values, as well as their prior knowledge and approaches to roles at home and in society. The young women saw a correlation between transformative learning, their civic engagement, and collective action. In addition, many participants referred to the ways that the informal learning that happened in their everyday, spontaneous discussions caused them to develop a sense of agency and the capacity to make strategic life choices (see, for example, Sabreen's example in Chapter 4 and Doreya, Saleema and Soha in Chapter 6). While this conclusion may contribute

significantly to a better understanding of how women learn through their social interactions, there is a need for future research to consider how people develop ways of knowing in the community at large. In addition, this conclusion presents an interesting paradox. On the one hand, as discussed in Chapter 2, explicit civic education offered through formal schooling to promote civic engagement has failed to reach the young people of Egypt. On the other hand, civic engagement is learned through spontaneous discussion within informal social networks. These spontaneous discussions have increased women's civic engagement, collective action, and effective practice of citizenship. There is a need, therefore, for a comparative study to examine why tacit learning of informal social networks may be more transformative than formal civic education at school. Available literature speculates that this discrepancy may relate to the failure of classroom tasks to provide the contextual, authentic features that resemble individually constructed personal social networks (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Yet, an empirical study to investigate this discrepancy is required.

Finally, in contrast to the literature on the cost of participation that was previously discussed in Chapter 2 (Downs, 1957; Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998), the findings of this study signify a discrepancy between the cost of participation for women and men (see, for example, the above findings and Saleema's case in Chapter 6). There is a need for empirical research aimed at investigating how women's cost of participation may differ from men's.

Contribution of the study

By exploring the unconventional civic practices of less-advantaged young women in the rural context of Egypt, this dissertation makes a significant contribution to furthering current theoretical debates in comparative education and international development. The study responds to a greater demand for different methodologies to capture and better understand public participation beyond SES as an explanatory model for political participation. The methodology used in this study offers different techniques that can examine citizens' interest in participating in civic and political life. This study may be the first to focus on this age group in the MENA region and, therefore, contributes to an extremely limited body of literature on rural young women and civic engagement. In addition, this study contributes to the areas of gender and women's studies, public participation, and education and development policy. The outcomes of this study begin to bridge the gap between theory and practice concerning education and the public participation of young women in developing countries. Particularly, this study develops a better understanding of the processes involved in promoting civic engagement using qualitative analyses across a broad, diverse sample of young women from three low-income, rural villages in Egypt.

Furthermore, this study contributes significantly to an understanding of how women learn through social interaction. Interviews with participants presented a deeper understanding of the pedagogical role that informal learning within women's individually constructed social networks plays in relation to the civic and political participation of marginalized people in rural Egypt. This study explored how young women in

authoritarian, marginalized, and conservative rural societies construct new roles and relationships beyond their families and schools. In this sense, the study provides detailed guidance on how rural, young women develop a sense of agency to increase their ability to make choices that affect their life, which in turn gains the recognition of their families and society.

In addition to its contribution to development policies and strategies aimed at greater and equal representation of women in public life, this study provides new directions for further research on the utility of unconventional solutions to provide equal and equitable learning opportunities for less-advantaged women in developing countries. The study highlights the need for future examinations of the various ways that less-advantaged groups in developing democracies around the globe manifest their civic activities based on their local contexts. It also lays the foundation for furthering current theoretical debates in comparative education and international development and in the areas of gender and women studies, public participation, and education and development policy. Finally, by troubling the long-existing SES model and other methodological approaches, this study is uniquely positioned to question and shine light on the current challenges faced by those who attempt to measure women's agency in developing countries. Alternately, this study also provides a basis for a different analytical framework capable not only of understanding the acts of young women's everyday lives as a form of participation, but also to better measure the empowerment and agency of young women in rural and authoritarian communities.

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