What Difference Can It Make? Assessing the impact of gender equality and empowerment in matters of inheritance in Egypt

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What Difference Can It Make? Assessing the impact of gender equality and empowerment in matters of inheritance in Egypt

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ABSTRACT
Denying women their right to inheritance is a problem that has been ongoing in some parts of Egypt for too long. The chances of disallowing women their inheritance increase when this includes agricultural land, which rural areas in Egypt perceive as the “domain of men.” Using mixed methods, this research analyzes the impact of obtaining inheritances on the lives of women and their families and explores the activities that are most influential in increasing women’s chances of attaining their inheritances. The research finds that gender equality and empowerment in matters of inheritance lead to measurable improvements in women’s lives, as well as their families’ economic well-being, health, and educational conditions, and allow a bigger role for women in decision making on household and community levels.

KEYWORDS
Awareness raising; economic well-being; Egyptian women; empowerment; gender equality; inheritance; legal reform; social well-being

Introduction
The Egyptian Personal Status Law no. 77/1943 regulates inheritance according to set portions defined by Islamic law, or *shari’a*. According to *shari’a*, “for men there is a share from what their parents and close relatives leave, and for women there is a share from what their parents and close relatives leave, be it little or considerable; a definite share.” Nonetheless, denying women their right to bequests is a problem that has been ongoing in some parts of Egypt for too long. A large percentage of women in Egypt, especially in Upper Egypt and border governorates, suffer from the denial of their right to inheritance, particularly after the death of husbands or...
fathers.\(^3\) In her study on the inheritance of women in Upper Egypt, Professor of Sociology Salwa Al-mahdy found that 95.5 percent of Egyptian women in Upper Egypt are denied their rightful share.\(^4\) The chances of disallowing women their inheritance increase when this includes agricultural land, which people in rural areas in Egypt perceive as the “domain of men.” As explained by the World Bank, when land is the essential source of pride and livelihood, communities develop a set of informal or customary laws to “govern how land is transferred across generations.”\(^5\) As a result, the percentage of female-owned agricultural land in Egypt is only 5 percent compared to 95 percent that is owned by men, as indicated by Egypt’s 2009–2010 agricultural census.\(^6\) This situation is found in many other African countries, such as Kenya, where women comprise the majority of the population, but still possess less than 1 percent of agricultural land. Similar to Egypt, the “Report on Amendments to the Law of Succession Act” traces this circumstance back to the inability of women to inherit property in Kenya.\(^7\)

Deeply rooted customs and traditions are the main reasons that lie behind disallowing women their inheritance, especially in Upper Egypt and border governorates. Denying women their rights to bequests has developed into becoming part of the usual practices and customary laws in such communities. In Upper Egypt, daughters are not offered their inheritance so that their husbands do not end up getting their hands on such property.\(^8\) Local communities believe that if a woman obtained her inheritance, it will fall back into the hands of her husband, who is still perceived as an outsider to his wife’s original family. The wife’s family usually questions, “How can a stranger take a share of our family’s property?”\(^9\) Another misperception that has developed over time is that it is \textit{shoam}, or ominous, for women to claim their inheritance and, hence, God will punish any attempt by them to do so while they are living or afterwards.\(^10\) Also, in many cases, a female’s claim for what is legitimately hers is perceived as offensive to her family. Therefore, relatives clash with such women, and may end up disowning them. In the best-case scenario, females receive a very small part of


\(^{4}\)Salwa Al-mahdy, \textit{Mirath Al-maraa fy Sa’eed Misr Bayn Al-wakee wa Al-maamool} [The Inheritance of Women in Upper Egypt between Realities and Aspiration] (Qena, Egypt: University of Qena, 2009), 7.


\(^{8}\)See Al-mahdy, \textit{The Inheritance of Women in Upper Egypt between Realities and Aspiration}, and Rania Hefny, “Denying Women their Inheritance.”

\(^{9}\)Ibid.

\(^{10}\)Rania Hefny, “Denying Women their Inheritance.”
their inheritance, which is called *radwa*, or compensation, and is incomparable to the full portion of what they deserve.\textsuperscript{11}

Ultimately, all of these thoughts and misperceptions have a negative impact on the women themselves, who often decide to refrain completely from demanding what is rightfully theirs. In her previously mentioned study on female inheritance in Upper Egypt, Salwa Al-mahdy concluded that women abjured from seeking their inheritance because they became certain that it was impossible for them to gain access to it. In addition, such females were influenced by their families’ traditions and, at the same time, were afraid of being disowned. As a result, many women decided to avoid such “shame” and refrain from demanding their property.\textsuperscript{12}

The European Union (EU) and CARE International have implemented several activities and initiatives during the past three years in an attempt to empower women to claim their rights to inheritance in Assiut and Sohag in Upper Egypt. Using a mixed methodology that combines quantitative and qualitative data, this research analyzes the impact of obtaining inheritances on women’s lives, as well as their families’ economic well-being, health, and educational conditions. The value of evidence-based research on female empowerment and the correlation between this and development is undeniable. Scholarly works published by the Institute of Labor Economics, the EU, and the World Bank expand our understanding of the various degrees and areas of influence where women’s empowerment can impact development on the household and community, as well as at the national levels.\textsuperscript{13}

This research also explores the activities that were most influential in increasing women’s chances of attaining their inheritances. Not only does this research fill a gap in the literature on the importance and practical impact of equal inheritances, but it also provides an overview of the socio-economic impact of acquiring inheritances on the lives of women and their families at the household level, which has been overlooked in the previous studies.

**Literature review**

Many studies discuss the various types of discrimination directed against women concerning matters of inheritance in African countries. The types of discrimination related to matters of inheritance range from violently evicting women from

\textsuperscript{11}Mohamed Awaad, “Penalizing the Denial of Women Right to Inheritance: Does it Ensure the Rights of Women in Upper Egypt,” *Al-mofakera Alkanoneya* [The Legal Diary], February 2018.

\textsuperscript{12}Salwa Al-mahdy, *The Inheritance of Women in Upper Egypt between Realities and Aspiration*.

their homes upon the death of their husbands to dangerous cultural practices that occur in some Sub-Saharan African states, such as “widow cleansing” or “widow inheritance.” In “widow cleansing,” the bereaved women are required to engage in sexual intercourse to remove their supposed “impurity” after their husbands’ deaths. “Widow inheritance,” on the other hand, entails females being inherited after their spouses’ demise for purposes of meeting cultural obligations or for companionship.

The literature addressing the discrimination against women related to matters of inheritance tends to approach the issue from two perspectives. Some analysts emphasize that women’s access to inheritance is a human right that needs to be advocated and ensured, regardless of the impact that comes from its acquisition. This approach emphasizes the legal aspects of the issue, and stresses that female inheritance is one of the rights that women should enjoy equally with men. This line of thought is found mostly in the scholarly and practical work of national and international legal and human rights organizations and entities, such as the Egyptian Center for Women Rights or the International Center for Research on Women. This perspective realizes that denying women their right to inheritance is an act of violence based on gender. Despite the fact that women may be exposed to various forms of repression and on several bases, such as class, ethnicity, culture, religion, or nationality, gender remains the key factor in determining women’s social reality from this perspective. For the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), gender equality requires “equal enjoyment by women and men of socially-valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards. Gender equality does not mean that men and women become the same, but that their opportunities and life chances are equal.” Hence, it follows that women should have the same access to inheritance as men.

A second, more progressive outlook in the literature emphasizes women’s right to inheritance as a right for females, but one that can also empower them socially and economically and magnify their share in decision making related to the family, society, and the nation. Thus, the 2010 World Bank Brief asserts that “improving women’s position relative to men’s is desirable not only based on equity but also on efficiency grounds.” This understanding provides a rationale for targeting women in policies because avoiding disparity in inheritance or inequality

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15 Ibid.

16 See, for example, Abo El Komsan and Mohsen, “Fundamentals of Law.”

17 There is a growing consensus by UNFPA and other international and national entities on defining gender as socially and culturally constructed characteristics reflected in the roles of women and men. Gender is associated with the power relations between men and women in a society from which community perceptions emanate.

in accessing inheritance negatively affects economic development at the household, or micro level, and the national, or macro level.\(^\text{19}\) Along the same lines, the World Bank, in 2012, published its World Development Report *Gender Equality and Development*, which intertwines both concepts. At the same time, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) affirms that empowering women is smart economics.\(^\text{20}\) The IMF asserts that more gender equality boosts economic efficiency. Hence, removing barriers to women’s participation in the labor market is expected to increase output and productivity. This only reiterates what the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) explained earlier:

Gender equality is intrinsically linked to sustainable development and is vital to the realization of human rights for all. The overall objective of gender equality is a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Equality between men and women exists when both sexes are able to share equally in the distribution of power and influence; have equal opportunities for financial independence through work or through setting up businesses; enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity to develop personal ambitions, interests and talents; share responsibility for the home and children and are completely free from coercion, intimidation and gender-based violence both at work and at home.\(^\text{21}\)

Not only does gender equality and women’s empowerment have an economic impact, but it also has a positive social bearing on women and their families because women tend to spend a greater portion of their incomes on health, education, and other social considerations. Female economic participation reduces poverty, increases the proportion of wage earners, and improves family social status because women tend to reinvest more of their earnings in items that benefit their families (e.g., health, education) than men.\(^\text{22}\) In addition, derived from the Gender Development Index findings, Carment and his fellow researchers reveal a strong correlation between gender development and stability that mirrors the relationship between development as a whole and stability.\(^\text{23}\) Several scholarly studies, including those of Candice Stevens and Michelle Alvarez, assert that gender equality is both a human rights issue and a necessity for sustainable development in a wider conception that goes beyond economic development and embraces social, political, and environmental modernization as well.\(^\text{24}\)

\(^{19}\)The World Bank Group, “Inheritance Laws and Women’s Empowerment in India.”


Overall, empowering women to claim and access their inheritance increases their ability to obtain and control resources, take action, and play a role in the decision making in their families, local community, and even markets. In addition, female ownership of agricultural land and other property supports women’s independence. Their freedom to make decisions enhances their feeling of safety in the event of separating from their male partners, as in the event of divorce or the latters’ deaths. Studies show that women who own a house or land are less exposed to domestic violence, and women who tend to fight for the right to inheritance are usually the ones who suffer economic difficulties and are afraid of their children becoming homeless or the like.

Nevertheless, a limited though expanding body of literature attempts to delve more deeply into the cost of denying women their inheritance, as well as the kind of impact that acquiring an inheritance can make on the lives of women and their families. For example, the Kenyan report “Amendments to the Law of Succession Act Necessary to Ensure Women’s Human Rights” attempts to “demonstrate the costs of deficiencies, a cost measured both in the lives of women who face poverty and violence as a result of their inadequate protection, as well as the cost to the economy of Kenya and to the next generation of Kenyan citizens.” Bayeh also uses qualitative methodology to investigate the role of “empowering women and achieving gender equality on sustainable development of Ethiopia.” Nonetheless, Bayeh ends up assessing the impact of gender inequality, instead of gender equality, on sustainable development by concluding that women are highly affected by contextual problems. Both studies use either qualitative or quantitative methods and neither of them attempts to combine both methodologies to ensure a broad quantitative coverage along with an in-depth, qualitative analysis.

As a result, there is still a gap in the literature. This is true especially with regards to using mixed methods when analyzing the socio-economic impact of denying or acquiring inheritance on the lives of women and their families. Hence, the utmost goal of this research is to highlight the impact or change which acquiring inheritance can make in the lives of women and their families, and the activities that are most influential in increasing women’s attainment of inheritance in Egypt: a country which is least tackled in the related literature. This case study will thus give a proper indication of the costs of denying women their inheritance at both the household and community levels.

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26 Ibid.


Research design and methodology

This research utilizes a combined methodology or mixed methods by intertwining qualitative methods with quantitative ones. The study collected quantitative data through a survey of women conducted in Assiut and Sohag governorates in Upper Egypt. The purpose of the survey was to identify the impact of receiving an inheritance on women’s lives and their living conditions and activities. A random sample of 420 women from Assiut and Sohag of almost equal sizes was used, where the number of women interviewed from each governorate was 207 and 213, respectively. As shown in Figures 1–4, the demographic, social, and economic characteristics of the sampled groups in Assiut and Sohag are very similar and appear parallel to each other. The illiteracy rates of women, for example, in Assiut and Sohag are 47 percent and 46 percent, respectively. The highest percentages of females in the two governorates come from the same groups; i.e., married, illiterate, and unemployed women. The lowest percentages are also in the same groups; i.e., women who are single or divorced, graduates, and retired or searching for jobs. Finally, most of the married women’s husbands in both governorates are “daily paid workers” by profession.

This study complements quantitative methods with qualitative ones, namely interviews and focus group discussions (or FGDs). The author conducted approximately twenty in-depth interviews with women who were able to acquire their inheritance. In addition, this researcher carried out six FGDs with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other groups involved in helping women to acquire their inheritance, such as clergy and mediation committees. The in-depth, semi-structured conversations and FGDs give insight about women’s personal experience with inheritance, in addition to the obstacles and opportunities with which these women have had to contend. The data from the survey, on the other hand, provide some idea of the size and type of impact that acquiring inheritances had on women’s lives and the kinds of activities that were most influential in helping women obtain

Figure 1. Demographic characteristics of the samples in Assiut and Sohag.
their property. Both quantitative and qualitative data are intertwined to present a fuller picture of the impact that receiving inheritances has on women’s lives and their living conditions.

**Figure 2.** Social characteristics of the samples in Assiut and Sohag.

**Figure 3.** Economic characteristics of the samples in Assiut and Sohag.

**Figure 4.** Distribution according to husband’s profession.
Main results and findings

In 2013, the EU and CARE carried out a series of activities which complemented and supported each other and helped empower women to claim and obtain their inheritances. The first activity entailed developing volunteers, hereafter referred to as “the pioneers of change,” to raise the awareness of the communities and map cases of inheritance denial. These efforts supported the role of mediation committees, which were composed of Muslim and Christian clergy, prominent societal figures, specialists in law, and representatives of youth, women, and men. Finally, the role of legal aid centers constituted a pressure force that increased the ability of the mediation committees to negotiate and convince the other parties to hand inheritances over to women. This was because those who were hindering women’s access to property realized that the females had legal assistance that would help them file lawsuits free of charge.

The impact of gender equality and empowerment in matters of inheritance in Sohag and Assiut

The EU and CARE contributed to the attainment of many women’s inheritances, impacting the lives of women who received their inheritances, as well as their families, by improving their overall living conditions. As shown in Figure 5, 89 percent of the questionnaire respondents confirmed that their access to an inheritance contributed to a change in their and their families’ lives. Around 73 percent of the respondents explained that this change included a positive transformation in their living conditions and their spending on food and drink, clothing, and the like. Also, 22 percent of the respondents indicated that this change had, to some extent, made a positive transformation on their living conditions and their spending on necessities. All of these are fundamental human rights as articulated in international charters and conventions.

Empowerment is fundamentally about power and the ability to define or redefine possibilities and options and to act upon them. According to the World Bank, “empowerment refers broadly to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one’s life. It implies control over resources and decisions. For

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30 The pioneers of change attempted to raise the awareness of their communities through seminars and meetings in public places, including inside schools or local units, during sport activities, and after Friday sermons. In addition, through what they called “door-knocking activities,” they visited villagers’ houses and met with men and women in order to raise their awareness about women’s rights to inheritance and the legal or religious implications of denying women such rights. The pioneers of change also organized interactive theater where villagers were the chief actors engaged in lively plays imitating cases of allowing or denying women their inheritance.

31 To accommodate the limited space in the charts, “Y” will refer to Yes, “N” will refer to No, “T” will refer to “To some extent” and “NA” will refer to “Not applicable.”

poor people, that freedom is severely curtailed by their voicelessness and powerlessness in relation particularly to the state, markets . . . and the household.”

The attainment of inheritances by many women has resulted in the broadening of their choices and in the improvement of their educational and health status, as well as those of their families. As shown in Figure 6, 66 percent of the respondents confirmed that their access to an inheritance contributed to improving the educational conditions of their families. Around 22 percent of the women also indicated that it improved education conditions, but only to some extent. On the other hand, 44 percent of the respondents reported that their access to inheritance improved the health conditions in their families, while 20 percent of the respondents indicated that it improved their health conditions to some extent.

In addition, women’s attainment of an inheritance contributed to improving the economic conditions of women and their families. As shown in Figure 7, 83 percent of the respondents reported that their access to an inheritance contributed to improving their monthly or annual income. Also, 11 percent of

Figure 5. The general impact of obtaining an inheritance on the lives of women and their families.

Figure 6. The social impact of obtaining an inheritance on women and their families.

respondents indicated that it contributed in improving their monthly or annual income to some extent. In addition, 63 percent of the respondents confirmed that they had saved all or part of their inheritance to launch a business/economic activity or expand their current economic activity. Around 23 percent of respondents indicated that they were planning to save part of their inheritance to start up a business/economic activity. The main reason behind such initiatives can be traced back to property management training, which was provided to women among the activities funded by the EU and CARE. As will be noted in the following sections, 86 percent of the respondents indicated that the property management classes were very useful.

In general, acquiring an inheritance contributed to improving the living conditions of women on various levels, not only socially or economically, but also in terms of security. The denial of women’s inheritance leads to the dismantling of families and the disruption of kinship networks. In many cases, this results in further disputes, such as acts of revenge, thus deteriorating the overall security situation. In that sense, acquiring an inheritance contributes significantly to avoiding crimes and disputes that may occur with family members over the inheritance.

Despite their positive impact, the activities funded by the EU and CARE had some negative impact on women. Around 16 percent of the respondents mentioned that acquiring their inheritance or even demanding it had a negative impact on them or their families. The majority of those respondents (79 percent) reported that their family relationships, especially with their male relatives, were disrupted. Also, according to 11 percent of them, the problem was that their husbands seized the inheritance; for 10 percent of them, the problem was the negative image that they experienced socially. Nevertheless, 95 percent of the respondents believed this to be temporary and were hopeful that their family ties would be restored over time. This reflects women’s consciousness that such

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**Figure 7.** The economic impact of obtaining an inheritance on women and their families.
negative effects are temporary and are to be expected, given the attempt to change habits, traditions, and misperceptions that have persisted for decades.

**Activities most influential in attaining women equal inheritance rights**

In general, the awareness-raising seminars, the knocking on doors, and the interactive theater activities were among the most influential activities in promoting women’s access to inheritance. This can be traced back to the role of the pioneers of change, who were carefully selected from the active personnel in their communities and were representative of men and women and young people. In that sense, they were trustworthy and were close to their communities due to their presence at the village level and their personal acquaintance with the people of the village. As shown in Figure 8, 84 percent of respondents confirmed that the seminars were useful, while 9 percent of the respondents indicated that they were beneficial to some extent. Similarly, 83 percent of the respondents confirmed that the door-knocking campaigns had been useful and 11 percent of respondents indicated that they were beneficial to some extent.

Given their structure, which included men of religion, men of law, prominent and influential figures in the community, the seminars managed to raise awareness of the community with regards to the religious, legal, and social aspects related to women’s right to inheritance. It was clear from the FGDs that the word of the clergy or other men associated with religion was significant in pointing out what they interpreted as God’s rule and in explaining the legal and religious foundations for the women’s right to inheritance. These individuals also explained that this right was not in contradiction with a woman’s right to her family’s affection because family kinship should not be conditioned on the woman’s waiver of her right to inheritance. On the other hand, the clergy in the FGDs confirmed that their

![Figure 8](image-url)

**Figure 8.** The activities most useful in empowering women on matters of inheritance.
words—either in Friday sermons in mosques, or those in churches or the discussions in seminars—were very influential in giving women back their rightful inheritances.34

The positive aspect concerning the seminars’ planning is that it capitalized on the various activities and services that were already planned or offered for women, children, or men. This includes conducting seminars and raising awareness as, for example, alongside early cancer detection services, family planning campaigns, vaccination campaigns, medical convoys, or the regular services delivered by social security departments, schools, and health care units. This increased the ability to reach more women and even men, who felt that they were getting more than one useful service at the same time. Overall, the awareness-raising seminars in Assiut were more effective than those in Sohag because the pioneers of change in Assiut cooperated from the beginning with multiple stakeholders, including local units and directors from the Department of Education and the Quality and Follow-Up units of that department, among others, and engaged the local people in mediation committees and training. As a result, they easily built upon such connections to provide awareness activities parallel to the services they deliver.

All of the participants in the FGDs in Sohag and Assiut praised the vital role that the door-knocking campaigns played in raising the awareness of women and in increasing community support for their rights. These grassroots campaigns managed to count and observe the cases of women who had been deprived from their inheritances, especially in remote and marginalized areas that were not easily accessible through seminars and educational trips.

In general, the unconventional and different activities delivered by the EU and CARE, such as organizing plays in schools, interactive theater in villages, and awareness through sports activities, managed to draw the attention of the target groups more than facilitate the direct dissemination of information. The participants in all of the FGDs in Sohag and Assiut pointed out that the interactive theater specifically was the most important activity that they received and aroused the attention of different segments in the community, whether they were women, men, or children. As shown in Figure 9, 74 percent of respondents confirmed that the interactive theater was useful, and 18 percent of respondents indicated that it was useful to some extent. Also, 65 percent of respondents confirmed that the educational trips were useful for girls and young people, while another 23 percent of respondents indicated that it was useful to some extent. Finally, 53 percent of the respondents confirmed that awareness through sports was useful, and 30 percent of the respondents indicated that it was useful to some extent.

34It is worth noting that this was not the first time a religious figure gave a speech on women’s rights to inheritance in a Friday sermon or at a meeting in a church. Nonetheless, instead of being organized on a mass scale by all clergy, this was done earlier in very rare occasions based on the demand of women who approached religious officials for assistance in getting their inheritances.
It is worth mentioning that the overall number of men targeted through the awareness activities was relatively small compared to the number of targeted women. Awareness activities funded by the EU and CARE targeted nearly 10,000 men, compared to approximately 29,000 women, who were reached through seminars, meetings, door-knocking campaigns, and other means. On the other hand, men were targeted during the Friday sermons, Ramadan evenings, and in some seminars. In fact, some activities did not specifically target men at all (e.g., door knocking and home visit campaigns), although it was anticipated that these actions would be effective in reaching men, especially the elderly and seniors who were most likely to be present at the time of the visit. In the FGDs with the clergy, such individuals stressed the importance of reaching out to the elderly or the heads of households, in addition to wealthy men who possess large inheritances and are determined to give these to their male descendents.

On the other hand, in the FGDs with clergy, the importance of Friday sermons in mosques and the talks in churches was stressed, and the respondents emphasized their preventive and corrective role. Using such outreach, the clergy attempted to raise the community’s awareness about women’s right to inheritance from a religion perspective and warn against the consequences of stealing such an inheritance. Friday sermons are heard by both women, who listen to them directly in the mosques or through microphones, and by men, who listen to them before prayers in the mosques. The clergy noted one of the cases in Sohag where a father was about to take action to deprive his daughters of their inheritance after his death. After listening to the sermon, however, he changed his mind. The clergy pointed to other cases where some men from the village came directly to them after the Friday sermon and volunteered to give their sisters their rightful share of the inheritance. In the FGDs, the clergy members also indicated that seminars were more highly attended by women than men, which demonstrates the
urgent need for women to listen to the perspective of religion on the subject of a woman’s right to inheritance. Females need to learn more about their right to inheritance and how to ask for it, especially with the spread of false rumors that they do not have any right to inheritance or that it is ominous for women to claim an inheritance. As pointed out earlier, the clergy have great value in the inculcation of ideas, especially in the village community. This fact was emphasized in the interviews with the beneficiaries, who asserted that the word of clergy, either in seminars or in mediation committees, was the most influential for their father and brothers, and persuaded them to give women their full inheritance.

The research further investigated the roles of mediation committees and legal aid centers in enhancing women’s accessibility to inheritance. As shown in Figure 10, the role of the mediation committees was particularly useful; 78 percent of the respondents confirmed that it helped them in gaining access to their inheritance, while 11 percent of the respondents reported that their role was useful to some extent.

It was clear from the FGDs that the reason for the strength of the mediation committees has to do with the structure of their membership. The composition of the mediation committees is characterized by three factors. First is its comprehensive nature, including Muslim and Christian clergy, prominent societal figures, specialists in the law, and representatives of youth, women, and men. Second, it offers expertise in the subject of female rights to inheritance, equipping it to delve in depth into women’s problems and enabling it to fully study each case presented to it. Third, its proximity to the target population, as the mediation committees were selected in a manner that is representative of every faction in the village and from among the influential and effective members of society. Hence,
the presence of the members of the mediation committees at the village level, their interaction with the people in the village, and their personal knowledge of its members are what made the EU and CARE mediation committees different from any other available committees.

This research finds that there has been an evolution in the role and power of the mediation committees. While at first the purpose of the committees was focused merely on mediating and resolving inheritance problems, they evolved over time due to the confidence they gained from villagers in the integrity of their members. The mediation committees’ role transformed to the degree that they became capable of solving problems that even the judiciary had been unable to solve. Also, the mediation committees’ role changed so that villagers started to ask for their help in solving problems that went beyond inheritance issues. The members of the mediation committees in Sohag indicated, during FGDs, that some people had asked them to intervene in reconciliation between families in matters of revenge and family disputes. One of the manifestations of the efficiency of the mediation committees in Sohag was that the National Council for Women asked for their help in mediating in two cases of inheritance from outside the village and, in fact, they succeeded in restoring women’s inheritances there.

It is noteworthy that, concerning the FGDs with representatives from the legal aid centers, the number of cases that the legal aid centers resolved directly was quite limited. Of some 180 cases that the mediation committees dealt with in the Sfielaq village in Sohag, for example, only 3 were presented to the legal aid centers, and one of these a court had already rejected due to the lack of sufficient documents. This fact has been confirmed again in the results of the questionnaire, where the respondents were asked about the main factor that helped them in restoring their inheritance. Only 3 percent of the respondents reported that it was the legal aid centers. Nevertheless, this should not indicate that there is no clear role for the legal aid centers. Their operations constituted a means of pressure that increased the ability of the mediation committees to negotiate with the other parties. This is because the committees convinced such individuals to hand inheritances over to women under threat of filing a lawsuit with the legal aid centers. As a result, 53 percent of the respondents confirmed that the legal aid centers were useful and 23 percent found them useful to some extent.

Finally, the EU and CARE funded some complementary and supportive activities, such as training women in how to manage and operate their agricultural and non-agricultural property. As shown in Figure 11, 66 percent of the respondents confirmed that the property management classes were useful and productive, while 20 percent indicated they were useful and productive to some extent.
What remains to be done?

It was clear, during the focus groups’ discussions, that the activities funded by the EU and CARE assisted many women in accessing their inheritance. Similarly, in the questionnaire, 82 percent of the respondents confirmed that the project helped them in accessing their inheritance and 7 percent of the respondents reported that it was somewhat helpful in accessing their inheritance (see Figure 12). As explained earlier, acquiring inheritances, in turn, improved the lives of the affected women and their families and allowed them to take a leap forward in terms of improving their living conditions in a host of ways. Nevertheless, 11 percent of the respondents reported that the activities funded by the EU and CARE did not help them, in any way, access their inheritance, which in turn deprived them from all possible improvements. The families of those women insisted on denying them their right to inheritance. Despite attending the seminars, meeting with the pioneers of change and the mediation committees, these individuals refused to give the women their share of an inheritance. In response, these women who were deprived from their inheritance did not attempt to take the matter to court. The FGDs and in-depth interviews with the target groups revealed a lack of confidence in the judiciary branch, due to the long periods of litigation, difficulties in law enforcement, and the lack of adequate official documentation supporting the women’s claims to the inheritance.\footnote{In some cases, women who wanted to claim their inheritances lacked the official documents that proved their rights. For example, they did not have a birth certificate. As a result, their relationship to their families became unofficial from a legal point of view, and did not involve any financial arrangements. Also, they may not have had an identity card and, therefore, were not recognized by the state. Sometimes, women’s inability to read and write was exploited to have them unknowingly give up their inheritance.}

In the FGDs with the members of the legal aid centers, a lawyer in one of the legal aid centers explained that more than 90 percent of the women whose problems could not be solved through mediation accepted the “Radwa” over resorting to legal channels or courts due to the previously mentioned societal and legal restrictions. Clearly, there is still a need for a strong and well-enforced legal framework criminalizing the act of
“depriving women from their inheritances” and assisting women who are unable to access their inheritance through negotiation or mediation.

As the EU and CARE activities relied heavily on raising awareness, they overlooked other important aspects of the issue of women’s inheritance. It is true that changing ideas and raising awareness are crucial to putting an end to bad practices and establishing new ones in favor of women’s rights to inheritance. While many misguided traditions and misconceptions about inheritance have persisted for years, new ideas can be expected to continue and last. Nonetheless, evidence from practice suggests that raising awareness alone is insufficient to eliminate some deeply rooted habits and beliefs. As noted in Figure 13, 66 percent of the respondents indicated that awareness and changing ideas are important in persuading families to give women back their inheritance. Still, 24 percent of the respondents indicated that this was partially sufficient, if at all.

Figure 12. The overall usefulness of the activities.

Figure 13. Assessing the importance of raising awareness.
According to the study done by Salwa Al-mahdy, solving the problem of denying women their rights to inheritance requires changing the culture of the community and reforming its thoughts. This also necessitates that firm punishment be imposed on whoever deliberately deprives a woman of her full right to inheritance with imprisonment, once this is proved by evidence. The same idea was confirmed in the questionnaire’s results, where only 10 percent of the respondents rejected the idea of employing punitive measures, while the remaining sample agreed on the importance of imposing a deterrent punishment, which some believed should be commensurate with the nature of the offense. Nonetheless, all of the participants in the FGDs stressed that the aim of the punishment should be to deter those tempted to deprive their relatives of their inheritance to the extent that denying the same becomes very costly. Yet crucial issues remain unsolved. As pointed out by the participants in the focus group discussions, it is essential to address the matter of missing documents, shorten the timeline for filing an inheritance lawsuit and reaching a judgment, simplify the judicial procedures related to inheritance, and improve law enforcement. Reforms for all of these matters will ensure stronger rule of law and increase the chances of restoring inheritances to women.

Concluding remarks

Ensuring gender equality and female empowerment on matters of inheritance has a wide impact on the lives of women and their families. The social and economic conditions of women and their families improve when women make progress. Not only does the family’s income rise, but also the impact of that increase reflects positively on the levels of education, as well as the health and security of the family. As asserted by the World Bank in 2011, and later reiterated by the IMF in 2012, “greater control over household resources by women, either through their own earnings or cash transfers, can enhance countries’ growth prospects by changing spending in ways that benefit children. Evidence from countries as varied as Brazil, China, India, South Africa, and the United Kingdom shows that when women control more household income... children benefit as a result of more spending on food and education.” Hence, acquiring an inheritance has a kind of multiplier effect on women and their families that tends to feed into a more inclusive and sustainable development extending beyond mere economic development.

36 Al-mahdy, The Inheritance of Women in Upper Egypt between Realities and Aspiration.
38 Revenga and Shetty, “Empowering Women is Smart Economics.”
39 Ibid.
In order to address gender inequality on matters of inheritance, however, it is necessary to change the habits, traditions, and misconceptions that surround the matter of inheritance and alter power relations within family. Among the groups that respondents to the questionnaire considered very important to target are the clergy, followed by elder family members, including parents and grandparents and mothers and grandmothers. Clearly, in order to modify such habits and traditions, all segments of society that perpetuate them must be considered, including men, who represent the party that is capable of giving women their inheritance or depriving them of it. Gender equality will not be achieved without the participation of men, who represent the most powerful party in these power relationships.

The integration of men into addressing and resolving women’s issues and in combating violence against women has been emphasized in various international forums. The 1994 World Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, for example, laid the bigger share of responsibility on men in achieving gender equality, and called for the participation of both sexes in reproductive health. Also, in 2000–2003, the UN Fund for Population issued a study on the partnership of men and the integration of men in reproductive health issues. In 2004, the UN Commission on the Status of Women proposed similar actions. In 2009, an international conference that took place in Rio de Janeiro called for the inclusion of men in the process of addressing women’s issues in order to change their attitudes and behavior towards gender equality.

Similarly, women should also be targeted. The motive behind seeking out women is not only because they should call for their own inheritances, but also because they—as mothers and grandmothers—are the reason for the perpetuation of misguided traditions, which they perpetuate for the future generations. The participants in the FGDs indicated that mothers were, in some cases, the major proponents of giving an inheritance to males over females. In addition, mothers train their daughters not to claim their rightful inheritance and warn them about the ominous consequences of seeking inheritances.

Changing ideas and perceptions through various awareness-raising activities, such as holding seminars and meetings, staging interactive theater, and providing education through sports, is very important in establishing new habits in favor of allowing females to exercise their rights to inheritance. Nevertheless, creating different habits and a new culture that supports women’s rights to inheritance requires not only such measures, but also a strong and well-enforced legal framework. Together, awareness raising and

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legal reform will create the foundation that will ensure women their rights to inheritance.

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**Notes on contributor**

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