



Egypt

Pilot Project: Human Rights-Based Premarital Counselling through Religious Actors

Egypt is facing considerable social challenges as its traditional perspective on marriage and family planning confronts a high divorce rate. Young people who live in rural areas and informal urban regions are especially impacted by patriarchal gender roles, limited education on reproductive health and rights, and limited access to counselling services.

The GIZ implemented project “Equal Opportunities and Social Development in Egypt,” (EOSD) collaborated with the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MoSS) and religious institutions to respond to these developments. The goal was to create a human rights-based curriculum for premarital counselling that would prepare young people for partnership and family planning and provide them with nonviolent communications strategies.

Results

As part of the project, a manual for standardised premarital counselling specifically aimed at religious actors was created together with the state’s “Mawadda” programme, which seeks to reduce Egypt’s divorce rate and to improve marital relationships. It highlights topics such as family structures, stress factors in partnerships, and how to manage conflict and makes clear the role of religious institutions in this work.

The practical application of this project began with a seven-day Training of Trainers (ToT) workshop for 16 religious leaders – among them representatives from Dar al Ifta as well as the Coptic-Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches. The aim of these interactive trainings was to pass on knowledge to participants but also to provide them with

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practical methods for supporting young people who have questions as they prepare for marriage.

A highlight of the project came in the form of a youth camp that took place with 53 young participants from disadvantaged areas. Combining theory and practice, the camp introduced participants to a variety of lessons and concepts on subjects like marriage and family, gender roles, or family planning. Sensitive topics like gender-based violence and inclusion of persons with disabilities were also addressed. Religious actors worked in tandem with psychosocial trainers to create a trusting atmosphere for the trainings in which difficult topics could be openly discussed. As a Catholic representative explained: “Before, we thought we had a programme for premarital counselling, but we realised it is not relevant at all for young persons since it is not interactive and too lecturing”.

The project not only had a direct effect on young people, it strengthened communications pathways between religious

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The Problem

Youth outreach is made difficult due to limited state infrastructure, especially in rural and informal urban areas. In addition, trust in the government and outside actors is quite low, especially when it comes to sensitive subjects, like gender roles, family planning, or reproductive health and rights.

The Role of Religious Actors

Religious actors enjoy trust and respect in both Muslim and Christian communities. This is especially true in rural areas where they are trustworthy members of the community that offer advice and listen.

groups. Leaders from Muslim and Christian communities who rarely work together were encouraged to come together in a constructive dialogue. This cooperation went beyond just the camp: The project was presented on the social media channels of MoSS, the Premier Minister, and the Catholic church, where it reached a broad public.

Learnings and Prospects

During the project phase, it became clear that it would be difficult to incorporate female representatives into the Training of Trainers, as religious institutions only sent three women representatives as part of the delegation of 16 nominated religious leaders. Despite efforts from the state to promote gender parity, this experience revealed the need to continue improving women's pathways to participating in such programme.

A further area of learning came from the lack of trust in state and external institutions, especially when it came to

sensitive subjects like family planning and gender-based violence. Tandem exchanges between religious and psychosocial trainers proved to be a good solution to building bridges and developing trust.

At the same time, it was recognised, that development cooperation with religious actors should not be done without the involvement of the government. There is a great need for transparent cooperation and communication. Therefore, practical communication with religious institutions and actors was led by the MoSS and relied on their relationships and networks.

This pilot project enhanced the cooperation between state institutions and religious actors. MoSS plans to distribute the curriculum at the national level and to continue working with the participating institutions. The project also marked the first attempts at opening a dialogue on social topics between representatives from Muslim and Christian communities. There's great interest in continuing the talks after the end of the project. The Egyptian partners also reflected on the project, which they saw as a success. As a result, they plan to expand the project to further groups.

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