***IVEY***

**CASE WRITING WORKSHOP**

**COPTIC ORPHANS**

In early 2005, Nermien Riad, CEO and founder of US-based Coptic Orphans (CO) learned that their Cairo partner for the girls mentoring program would no longer provide logistical support to this, their second pilot site. Ms. Riad wondered whether or not to continue this program as a means to increasing (scaling up) CO’s impact in reducing injustices to children in Egypt.

# Coptic Orphans Background

## Origins and Vision

During a 1987-1988 tour of duty to Egypt with the U.S. State Department, Nermien Riad, an Egyptian-born engineer, visited a Coptic orphanage in Cairo (see Exhibit 1). She was moved by the children’s predicament and when she lamented it, the Sister replied, “Why do you say ‘Poor things’? You should see their families!” Riad then learned that the orphanage was filled with children who were not orphans but whose families could not afford to feed them. Coptic Orphans was founded in 1989 as a small voluntary effort to provide funds to Coptic orphanages in Egypt. In 1992, it incorporated as a Virginia-based U.S. 501(c)3 nonprofit, and by 2005 Coptic Orphans had grown from the charity and small scale of one American Coptic Christian into a professional international nonprofit organization with a staff of 19, and branch offices in Canada and Australia, in addition to Egypt.

CO’s vision was “to see every vulnerable child of Egypt confidently face the future with a renewed sense of hope and a life enriched with education, health and equality.” This vision, along with its Americanized Coptic origin and faith base, yielded a distinctive organizational culture. CO was the subject of a study on organizational culture, which confirmed what Riad already instinctively knew about herself and her staff: theirs is the culture of the hero archetype. As Riad put it, “whatever obstacle you put in front of me, I am more challenged to get over it. Nothing will stop me. With God on my side, who could stand against me? I fear nothing. That’s the hero in me because I need to save these children.”

## Not Alone: Direct Assistance

CO’s primary activity was direct child assistance through the Not Alone program. Through child sponsorship the children received school assistance, food, and other necessities, costing approximately $12 per month per child. Coptic Churches in Egypt nominated a representative from within their congregation to serve the children within the geographic scope of the congregation. The volunteer representatives (or Reps) had to be educated (college degree preferred) and became responsible for identifying needy children who lost one or both parents. CO trained Reps to be child advocates and Reps then visited each child on a weekly basis. Reps provided mentoring to ensure literacy and general development, including hygiene training. Parents and guardians were encouraged to comply with the requirements of the program—including keeping their children in school, ensuring they do their homework, and maintaining cleanliness of house and person—in order to maintain the assistance. Over time they adjusted their priorities about what is important, valuing literacy and cleanliness, for example.

CO worked with Christian volunteers and did not serve Muslim children through Not Alone. If a Christian regularly entered the home of a Muslim it could be viewed as an attempt to convert them. According to Shaaria Law, this act was punishable by death.

# Scaling Up to Address Injustices to Children

## The Initial Decision and First Pilot

It was 2:00 a.m. in the Spring of 2002. At the CO headquarters in Riad’s basement in Virginia, Riad and an American Coptic volunteer, Phoebe Farag, were finally calling it a day. Riad was reflecting on her ambitions to scale up CO for greater impact. She felt as if they could never do enough, and she always wanted to find a way to reach Muslim children as well. Farag, a George Washington University graduate student of international education, said, “You know, there’s really a problem for girls.” Farag suggested a focused project. “Hmmm. Tell me more,” responded Riad. After a quick brainstorm, with Farag outlining everything she would need, to Farag’s surprise, Riad pronounced, “Why not? Let’s try it!”

Modeled after the big sister concept, the Valuable Girl Project (VGP) would pair older girls (15-20) with younger girls (7-13) who would receive academic support and benefit from having a positive role model. Big sisters would receive a monthly stipend and benefit from being identified as leaders. CO would target high poverty areas of Egypt, where girls of all ages faced a high risk of dropping out of school due to poverty and bias against girls.

Riad knew from the start CO would try to replicate VGP and achieve as much coverage as possible. But since the idea of mentoring was so new in Egypt, and because CO had never sought to work with Muslim children before, Riad knew they needed to start simply, work out all the bugs, and then pilot the full model.

Farag followed the model and guidance of her Masters program and suggested beginning with school observations to make the appropriate site selection. They started by investigating sites where CO had been implementing Not Alone for some time. CO had earned trust in these communities and Farag was enthusiastically received. While CO explored several possible sites, Riad and Farag chose a private Christian school whose Principal was a long time Rep of the Not Alone program. He had said, “Anything you want, we will do for you.” True to his word, when a school holiday was announced for the day CO was to conduct its observations, the Principal saw to it that all of the students came to the school that day anyway. He nominated both a Project Coordinator and initial mentors from the high school.

After a year, pre- and post-tests indicated increases in self-esteem (80% of mentors), improved grades (53% of little sisters), and higher school retention rates (98% of all participants stayed in school). Many of the mentors applied their stipends to their own school fees (49%), enabling them to stay in school; others helped with family expenses (22%) or spent the stipends on personal items (29%). With this year of success behind them, Riad decided it was time to consider replicating the program to a new site and adding Muslim girls. Clearly, this could not be done through a Christian School and it would require growing and re-orienting CO staff to an expanded scope.

## Staffing

Riad knew that by US standards VGP was not a costly proposition. The monthly stipends for mentors were only $10. With up to fifty mentors only $500 per month per site would be required. The oversight, training, and transportation for training and staff would be more costly. But none of this would be of great concern as CO had a steady and growing donor base through the Coptic Church in North America and Australia. The biggest challenge would be staffing.

Adding staff to coordinate each VGP site and manage the area programs would be necessary, but Riad worried about losing the values and core identity of CO in the process. With each new hire, Riad shared the history and story of CO, and she personally made time to work with them on something together—whether in the US or in Egypt. This way, the new staff member experienced first-hand how the founder thinks. For US-based staff, Riad made sure they had an opportunity to visit the field and see the children personally.

VGP would impact the current staff as well. Riad had observed that Egyptians, sometimes even after settled in the US, were very resistant to change. Some of her staff worried about the challenges a new project would pose to their daily work routines and became very nervous at the thought of adding new people to the staff. In Egypt the staff were first uncertain about this new concept of mentoring. Then, even after the initial success, they became leery at the prospect of including Muslim children, as they argued that Christians would never agree to send their daughters to activities inclusive of Muslims for fear they would be converted. Riad assured the Egyptian staff that CO would take precautions and that they should at least try. Then the staff argued that Muslims would never agree to participate for fear of being converted. Riad argued, “we will make sure to allay their fears”; again, they should try. Riad and Farag proposed that the Christian mentors be asked to identify potential Muslim mentors from their school who could then recruit Muslim little sisters.

# Co-Religious Mentoring in Cairo

The highest priority was to find a neutral facility where Christian and Muslim girls could come together. Farag presented the idea of VGP to the annual Rep conference and solicited ideas for NGO partners and locations. The idea of mentoring was difficult to explain—especially in Arabic—and only a few Reps approached her with some ideas, one of which seemed viable. One Rep knew of a Coptic Church-affiliated NGO in Ezbit el Haganna, a squatter area of Cairo. While it was Church-affiliated, the NGO had already established a reputation of serving both Muslims and Christians and was accepted by both in the community.

Next, CO approached the Father of the Church and explained the Project. This was not a Church with which CO had worked before and the Father was not very familiar with CO’s programs elsewhere in Egypt. Still, he agreed to provide logistical support, such as transportation to the site for CO staff, and made available the facility as a meeting place for the participants.

VGP in Cairo was off to a good start and the recruiting method Riad and Farag proposed was working. The US Embassy in Cairo provided CO’s first-ever external grant to support VGP ($5,330). By January, 2004, the Project was well-established in Cairo with each mentor serving two younger girls—one Christian and one Muslim. Together, with the first site, VGP was now serving 200 girls.

But the support from the Church was sluggish. The person assigned to assist with transportation was rarely available or simply would not show up when called. The Father of the Church complained that CO was not registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs, despite the fact that CO had filed all the paperwork a year earlier. The Egyptian Government had been cracking down on any NGOs with links to US promotion of democratization and civil society support. Some NGOs had been closed or their staff arrested. The Father worried that this Project would attract the attention of Egyptian National Security.

In early 2005, Riad received a request to visit VGP from Dina Powell, then White House Chief of Personnel, and of Egyptian Coptic origin herself. Riad was thrilled with the attention CO was receiving and hoped this would enable further expansion and opportunities. She agreed immediately. To her surprise, Dina Powell showed up with an entire security entourage, with multiple cars and sirens to boot. For the local Father this was the last straw. He would no longer have anything to do with VGP or Coptic Orphans.

Back in Virginia, Riad wondered if she should try to somehow resurrect her second pilot site. Maybe she should start over somewhere else.

**Exhibit 1. Copts in Egypt**

Copts comprise a majority of the eight to ten percent of Christians in Egypt. In addition to ongoing challenges to church construction, the U.S. State Department (2006) reports continuing government discriminatory practices against Copts, including discrimination in hiring and political representation, and a lack of cooperation with Christian families seeking to regain custody of their daughters who are forced to convert to Islam by Muslim men (Ibid.). Perhaps most disturbing, 2005-2006 saw an upsurge in inter-religious societal violence, mostly directed against Copts. In October, 2005, the performance of an inflammatory play in a Coptic Church in Alexandria resulted in the murder of two Copts and sparked subsequent rioting. While such incidents have occurred periodically in recent years, many fear that the frequency and intensity of inter-religious violence is increasing.

Beyond the political context, quality of life in Egypt ranges from adequate to very poor. Over the last decade, Egypt made sufficient progress on the Human Development Index to be reclassified from low to medium on human development, though regional and gender gaps are still prevalent (UNDP, 2005). In 2004, there were approximately 2.15 million people unemployed, and 20.16% of the population lived below the poverty line. Upper Egypt, where the majority of Copts reside, remains the lowest performer on all indicators, with the highest rates of illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, and poor health (Ibid.).

**Sources**

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