

Multiple Meanings, Identities, and Resistances: Egyptian Rural Women's Readings of Televised Family Planning Campaigns

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This feminist, ethnographic audience study analyzes how different groups of Egyptian rural women struggled to construct and reflect their subjectivities and identities, both as women and mothers, while making meaning of the messages in a televised governmental family planning campaign. The study investigates the complexity of factors which formed and transformed these women's multiple identities, and which were, in turn, reflected in their multiple readings of the televised family planning messages, as well as in their multifaceted resistances on different levels: resistance to the traditional reproduction norms embedded in their own socio-cultural context; resistance to the dominant figures in their own families; and resistance to the dominant family planning ideology proposed by the government. In explaining why and how the women in the Egyptian village of Kafr Masoud came up with dominant, oppositional, or negotiated readings around the themes in the televised family planning messages, the study pays special attention to the impact of the process of social change on the transformation of these women's gendered identities. It also explores the effects of these women's social networks, their household structures, the oral forms of communication in their community, as well as the collective pattern of television viewing in the village on forming these women's views and attitudes towards the issue of family planning, in general, and towards the televised family planning messages, in particular.

Keywords: Identities, Meanings, Resistances, Egyptian Rural Women, Family Planning

Introduction

This study investigates "why" and "how" different groups of rural Egyptian women in the village of Kafr Masoud in northern Egypt produced differing meanings out of the messages in televised governmental family planning announcements, and how this complex meaning production process overlapped with the equally complex processes of social change, identity transformation, and multifaceted resistances. In doing so, the study attempts to answer the following questions: How did the process of

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social change in rural Egypt impact the formation and transformation of these women's feminine and maternal identities? How did these competing identities, in turn, influence these women's acceptance, rejection, or negotiation of the hegemonic, dominant family planning ideology propagated by the Egyptian government on television, as well as their differing, or even conflicting, interpretations of the messages in this campaign? How did these complex processes produce multiple resistances in different forms and on numerous levels?

To answer these questions, the study explores the interaction and interrelatedness between the complex processes of gendered identities' construction, social change, media reception, and meaning production (Khamis, 2004). In doing so, the study reclaims ethnic and socio-cultural dimensions in the study of women's changing lives and multifaceted experiences as media receivers and meaning producers, taking into account "the ways that gender always already intersects with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class" (Dow & Condit, 2005, p. 449), and enabling the investigation of "the social constructions of gender" (Aldoory, 2005, p. 680). Therefore, this study explores the intersecting factors of gender, generation, socioeconomic capital, and personal experience as significant factors shaping these women's subjectivities and influencing their reproductive decisions on the one hand, and, their meaning-making experiences on the other.

I argue throughout this study that these women's contrasting subjectivities are clearly manifested through two equally important sites of struggle. First, their own bodies are sites of struggle through which reproductive decisions and actions are endorsed, negotiated, or resisted, taking into account that the body is a site of intersectionality between race, class, sexuality, and gender (Bordo, 1993). Second, the mediated texts are sites of struggle for accepting, negotiating, or rejecting dominant family planning ideologies and hegemonic governmental policies, taking into account the encounter between two "performative subjects — a certain elite who . . . produces national television for imagined audiences, and various subalterns who not only appreciate and enjoy but critically interpret, select, and evaluate what the elites produce, always in the context of their everyday lives" (Abu-Lughod, 2005, p. 12). In doing so, I examine how a multitude of factors, including age, gender, social structures, everyday discourses, and personal experiences affect the outcomes of these encounters through a "process by which power is produced and reproduced or transformed" (Abu-Lughod, 2005, p. 9).

I also argue that the competing subjectivities, identities, and resistances that reveal themselves throughout this study as a result of these series of encounters between message producers, who mostly represent the dominant, hegemonic ideologies, and creative audiences, and who may come up with counter-hegemonic or oppositional ideologies, are directly related to the prevailing socio-cultural patterns of reproduction in rural Egypt, and they perfectly mirror the complexities, contradictions, and tides of change in this local context. However, before exploring these aspects, it is essential to provide an overview of the predominant development communication models and some of the tensions and debates around them, in general, as well as their relevance to the overpopulation "problem," as defined by the Egyptian government, and in particular, the communication efforts exerted to deal with it.

Development Communication: Models, Tensions, and Debates

During the late '50s and the '60s, the approach to development stressed the need for rapid economic growth by means of industrialization, capital-intensive technology, centralized planning, and the need for the less developed countries to achieve progress by emulating the industrially advanced countries and taking the same historical path that they had traversed (Dissanayake, 1981). The insights of communication science were applied, under this model, to transmitting development information and persuading traditional rural populations to accept new ideas, to modernize — in one word, to “develop.” Out of this philosophy was born a new offshoot of communication science, namely the “diffusion of innovations” to Third World traditional rural societies (Carmen, 1990). This approach came to be widely known as the “old model of development communication.”

The champions of this old model, such as Daniel Lerner (1964), Everett Rogers (1976), and Wilbur Schramm (1964, 1973), emphasized the power of the “communicator,” exercised through the deployment of mass media, as well as the importance of the notions of manipulation and persuasion, with little regard for the “receiver” and the “social structure” in which he/she finds himself/herself.

After failing to bring about the desired results and the promised changes, this approach has been attacked by a number of authors (McAnany, 1980; Carmen, 1990, 1996) on the basis of its narrow, linear, and “one-dimensional” view of the communication process, which reflects an equally narrow, ethnocentric, “cause-effect” outlook on the development process and the role of the media in it. According to McAnany (1980), communication scholars’ primary concern with determining media “effects” under this paradigm, pursued using positivistic methods, has distracted attention from the diversity of the human experience, which influences the reception of these messages. Another major criticism of this traditional model was that it placed too much emphasis on the individual and laid the blame at her/his door without taking the social structure into sufficient consideration. Advocates of this approach often accused the peasants in the less developed countries of being too traditional, conventional, superstitious, and fatalistic, as exemplified in the notion of the “subculture of peasantry” (Rogers, 1976), for example.

However, they totally ignored, as Dissanayake (1981) argues, the underlying social structure, which would explain more fully some of these characteristics. According to this model, obstacles in the way of modernization (and by implication, development) are many, but all have, to a greater or lesser degree, to do with deficiencies within individuals or individual societies. This hypothesis came later to be known as the discourse of the “individual-blame bias” or the “individual-blame hypothesis,” as Carmen (1990, 1996) maintains. He argues that this view of the issue of underdevelopment failed to set the information environment of traditional people, namely the rural poor, firmly within the larger political and economic structures of the particular country. The external and internal structures of domination, and the structural constraints on the potential of information, were largely ignored, according to McAnany (1980), in favor of overemphasizing and singling out the power of the media in bringing about change and fostering development.

Another largely ignored factor, under this traditional paradigm of development communication, was gender, since a very clear shortcoming in most development communication efforts in the past was their disregard for women and the absence of a gender dimension in most of these interventions. In other words, "the discovery that people can and indeed need to be 'put first' came only after decades during which people, when taken into consideration at all, were assumed to be composed of the male half of the species only — women traditionally having been excluded from development discourse and practice" (Carmen, 1996, p. 48). The traditional strategies of development programs for the Third World have overlooked women as "active" participants in communication processes. In addition, programs to foster women's communication in development have misinterpreted the situation of women. The analysis of women in communication is built on an erroneous assessment of women's lack of participation in communication and their marginalization in the "private" sphere, just as women's absence from the "male-dominated" discourse has been equated with their total absence from community life (Steeves, 1990).

This insensitivity to women's true conditions and their real situations is a result of what Dian Elson (1991) describes as "male bias" in the development process, where development goals and programs are largely defined according to men's visions and needs, and where women's real needs are mostly ignored. This means that women gained less than men from the development efforts of the past, which mostly worked against them, rather than for them. This situation is even worse in the case of Third World women. According to Carmen (1996), Third World women and their children constitute the "Fourth World" of the Third World, "who traditionally have been the overlooked 'forgotten resource' — the invisible, unrecognised, unpaid, and unrecorded workhorses of the development sweatshop" (p. 36).

The shortcomings and setbacks of the old development communication paradigm necessitated the birth of a new paradigm to counter these defects and limitations. Unlike the old development communication model, where the problem has always been approached from the communication perspective, by asking "what communication can do for development" (Steeves, 1990), the "new development communication model" avoids necessarily looking for "effects" or "impacts." Rather, it simply documents what part communication can play in the change processes, and if no significant role for communication is found, then a conclusion is reached that communication is not highly relevant to development in this particular case (*ibid.*).

Under this new paradigm, attention shifted to a bottom-up, rather than a top-down approach, relying on two-way and multi-way communication, rather than one-way communication; audience feedback; and development orientation based on participation and respecting human needs and rights, rather than emphasizing manipulation, persuasion, and propaganda. These shifts reflect a realization that development and communication should not be centralized, linear, or isolated processes. Rather, they should reflect a high degree of diffusion, participation, complexity, and global interdependency (Carmen, 1996). This, in turn, gave birth to new important concepts, such as "popular participation," "grassroots development," and "people-centered, integrated rural development," which had significant implications on the field of development communication (Dissanayake, 1981).

This new model of development communication also stresses "dialog" between the source of knowledge and the receiver of that knowledge, instead of one-way "monologue." This dialog, according to Carmen (1990), excludes a "top-down," "superior-inferior" relationship between senders and receivers, or communicators and audiences. It became evident under this model that, if any communication is to succeed, the communication message must meet the needs of the receiver, and the meaning of the message has to be ultimately shared by both the sender and the receiver (Carmen, 1990). Additionally, by introducing a "gender" and "cultural" perspective, this new model challenged traditional development communication approaches by exploring how women's own communication activities can question these assumptions (Riano, 1994).

Overpopulation and Development Communication: The Egyptian Case

Egypt, like most developing countries, suffers from a number of challenges which, according to the Egyptian government, threaten its capacity to achieve social and economic progress. Three interrelated challenges have been particularly highlighted by the Egyptian government, namely overpopulation, illiteracy, and a lack of health awareness. These three challenges have been portrayed in many official governmental media campaigns and development programs as highly interconnected, serious threats to the nation's development and prosperity, and as being both a cause and an effect of another equally threatening problem, poverty. However, the overpopulation "problem," to use the Egyptian government's terminology, was singled out by the government as "the main obstacle hampering all development efforts in the country" (EDHS, 1998, 2004). Therefore, the Egyptian government started a very active campaign, pursued since the early 1980s, relying on various types of media — mainly, televised announcements — to promote family planning awareness and practice. This campaign employed a variety of strategies, such as using cartoons, featuring famous actors and actresses, and relying on repeating slogans and jingles.

The Egyptian television, which was introduced in 1960, during the time of the late president Gamal Abdel Nasser, was chosen as the prime medium for launching this campaign. This is mainly because it is considered the number one medium in Egypt, in terms of its outreach capacity, and because of the audience's exposure to it. It has a viewership rate of over 98% in both urban and rural areas, according to a survey by the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU, 1999). Additionally, the same survey indicated that television is a widespread medium in most rural areas in Egypt due to the availability of electricity, as well as the affordable price of a used TV set. It confirmed that 96% of rural homes in Egypt own a TV set, and indicated that 97.9% of rural Egyptians watch television and rely on it more than any other medium. Another reason for choosing television, in particular, is that it overcomes the barrier of illiteracy, which makes it the best medium for reaching rural people, who are the group with the highest rate of illiteracy. It is important to mention that the Egyptian television is a publicly operated and state owned medium, which has always been under the direct supervision and regulation of the Egyptian government, through the Ministry of Information. Interestingly, the Egyptian Ministry of Information was, upon its establishment, referred to as the "Ministry of Culture and Guidance," a name which suggests a hegemonic, top-down ideology in dealing with both the media and the masses. This is consistent with the fact that national television is largely used in Egypt as a "mass mobilization tool" to spread and support the government's domestic, regional, and international policies (Abdulla, 2006). Therefore, its programs

could be considered a reflection of the Egyptian government's general policy and developmental strategy, and they provide a clear example of "top-down" planning on the government's part. This, in turn, means that these government-funded and -organized programs represent the hegemonic, dominant ideology — as put forward by the Egyptian government — regarding the issue of family planning.

Highlighting the impact of television as a mass medium in Egypt, Laila Abu-Lughod (2005) mentions that it "may be one of the richest and most intriguing technologies of nation building in Egypt, because it works at both the cultural and sociopolitical levels, and it weaves its magic through pleasures and subliminal framings" (p. 9). She explains that this strong impact led to two equally important roles played by Egyptian television in the process of nation-building. The first role is that of the preserver of the status quo, through entertaining and informing the masses, but without upsetting "the divide between the educated and the uneducated, the privileged and the marginal, and those struggling for power and those excluded from it" (p. 245). She suggests that television contributes to the maintenance of the existing social structures in Egypt, with all their disparities and inequalities, through entertaining audiences and drawing them into the nation, but without suggesting "how they might transform their nation-state to make it a more equitable or just place" (p. 245). The second role is that of the "agent of public information and education" (p. 10), which became particularly prevalent under Nasser, who deployed mass media, and especially television, to "inform" and "educate" the masses, through mostly developmental and educational programs. Therefore, television was effectively utilized for "citizen education" and mass mobilization, as well as for spreading hegemonic, governmental policies and dominant ideologies through its efforts to "create loyalty, shape political understandings, foster national development, modernize, promote family planning . . . or . . . entertain" (p. 12).

Moreover, the family planning campaign was mainly targeted at rural women. The first — and most strongly stressed — reason behind targeting rural women, in particular, from the Egyptian government's perspective, is that they are the segment of the population that suffers the most from the three previously mentioned problems of poverty, illiteracy, and overpopulation. The Egyptian Demographic Health Survey (1998, 2004), or the EDHS, mentioned that Egyptian rural women, who have the highest illiteracy rates, and who usually suffer the most from poverty, are also the ones who have the largest number of children. Abu-Lughod (2005) mentions that two particular groups have been framed, since the early part of the 20th century, as "major objects of social reform, uplift, and modernization in Egypt: peasants and women" (p. 10). Therefore, this special focus on rural women, in particular, could be best interpreted as part of television's efforts to ensure that "audiences were . . . brought into national and international political consciousness, mobilized, modernized, and culturally uplifted" (p. 11). In light of this view, Egyptian television's main goal was to "eliminate cultural illiteracy" through introducing the "uneducated" and "uncultured" masses to new discourses and making them aware of the larger world (ibid.). One of these new discourses was the concept of the "small family," as defined by the Egyptian government in its televised family planning campaign.

The governmental perspective, which defines overpopulation as a "national problem" and a "major obstacle" to development, according to the Egyptian National Population Council (NPC, 1994), is based on two main justifications, as outlined by Mokhtar Aboul Kheir (1996). The first one is the high

population growth rate compared to the available resources, since the rapid population increase is expected to outgrow the resources and, therefore, to swallow up any possible economic gains or developmental efforts. The second one is the poor demographic characteristics of the society, in terms of the high rate of illiteracy and the spread of serious diseases, as well as the insufficient basic infrastructure, such as the shortage in health services, educational services, and transportation facilities. These services are expected to not match the fast population growth rate and to rapidly deteriorate as a result of it. The objectives of the Egyptian government's family planning policy, according to the official Center for Information, Education and Communication (CIEC, 1999), are multiple: lowering the birth rate through promoting the image of the "small family" (consisting of a mother, father, and two children) as the "ideal family"; increasing the actual rate of contraceptive use, especially in rural areas; and fighting some of the widespread rumors and misconceptions about contraceptive methods. They also include overcoming the discontinuation of contraceptives; advocating specialized medical advice; and promoting men's participation in the process of family planning, both in terms of discussion and consultation, and in terms of active participation and involvement, i.e., using male contraceptive methods.

This governmental view on the issue of overpopulation was critiqued on a number of grounds by both Egyptian and Western authors and experts. The first criticism was that this view assumes that high fertility rates are the cause of underdevelopment, an assumption which has been widely contested and debated in the literature on population (Mies & Shiva, 1993; Warwick, 1982; Aboul Kheir, 1996). In line with this point, some Egyptian development consultants even pointed out that the Egyptian government's family planning policy could not be considered a developmental issue in the first place. They argued that the experiences of other countries clearly show that other variables, such as national production, social equality, and income distribution, could be considered more important elements in fostering development, or hindering it, regardless of the population growth rate (Louza, 1998). Some Egyptian writers, such as Fergany (1994) and Aboul Kheir (1996), also believe that the government's attempt to curb the fast population growth rate is simply a "substitute" for investing in improving the basic infrastructure, services, and facilities in the country and adopting better economic policies.

Warwick (1982) challenges the underlying assumption about promoting "welfare" and better family life, which is put forward by many governments, including the Egyptian government, as an attempt to conceal the more direct and real target of reducing fertility rates and controlling population growth. He argues that the main reason behind these governments' emphasis on the notion of "individual welfare" is to make the concept of family planning and birth control more sellable. He also points out that "when individual motives and public policies did not mesh . . . these governments . . . insisted ever more loudly that the purpose of family planning programmes was individual and family welfare rather than population control" (Warwick, 1982, p.32).

One particular point of interest and relevance to this study is the role of religion in this process. Warwick (1982) argues that some religious leaders and intellectuals in Egypt, as well as elsewhere, especially in the Arab and Islamic world, contended that whereas the notion of child spacing was permitted and acceptable, the concept of birth limitation was foreign and religiously unacceptable. Many of these religious leaders, therefore, started to spread counter-hegemonic ideas about the religious illegitimacy of the concept of "birth control," as introduced by the Egyptian government. The findings of

this study provide ample evidence of this religious, counter-hegemonic discourse in rural Egypt. Interestingly, although the terminology used by the Egyptian government in its televised family planning campaigns has always emphasized the notion of "family planning," rather than "birth control," the fact remains that its policy fits under the latter, rather than the former, category. This is mainly because it emphasized the importance of having a "small family," consisting of a father, a mother, and two children. This deliberate choice of terms could, therefore, be perceived as an attempt on the government's part to avoid attacks from religious leaders and scholars on the grounds that its introduced concept of family planning contradicts Islamic teachings.

Most importantly, there is a clear urban/rural divide in the crosscurrents of national opinion in Egypt on the issue of family planning, and the Egyptian government did not exhibit a high degree of sensitivity to this important point. In other words, such attempts to advocate family planning through organised governmental efforts, could be attacked for violating the "ethics of respect," in favor of applying the "machine theory" in reproduction, as well as for their insensitivity to, and their neglect of, people's indigenous fertility needs and demands, which are part of the overall socio-cultural fabric of reproductive norms (Warwick, 1982).

Additionally, birth control efforts and family planning policies were also attacked by a number of feminist writers, such as Rich (1977), Mies and Shiva (1993), and Kabeer (1994), for asserting and consolidating men's control over women's reproductive capacities, especially Third World women. A number of authors also questioned the underlying assumption about the universality of the demand for family planning, which is inherent in such programs (Warwick, 1982; Inhorn, 1994; Mies & Shiva, 1993). In every case, these authors tried to elicit the alternative views, priorities, and values which are held by different people in different cultures and societies regarding the issue of reproduction and childbirth. In doing so, they argued against imposing one universal, monolithic view of the "ideal family size," or the best birth control patterns, from one hegemonic, authoritative source.

The above discussion reveals that the Egyptian government's family planning media strategy fits under the "old paradigm of development communication," (Schramm, 1964, 1973; Lerner, 1964; Schramm & Lerner, 1976; Lerner & Schramm, 1972; Rogers, 1976) because it emphasized the power of delivering developmental messages and transmitting information about important issues in a top-down manner, through a government-owned and controlled medium (i.e., television), to a target audience, which is supposed to passively apply what the government is saying, a message that is articulated without sufficiently taking the audience feedback or involvement into consideration, and without being sensitive enough to social, cultural, and gender issues and diversities. In other words, it assumed that communication/information was an independent variable in the development process, and that, consequently, the exposure to mass media messages could be a powerful enough force to generate the desired changes (McAnany, 1980).

It also upheld the "individual-blame hypothesis" (Carmen, 1990, 1996), through criticizing and dismissing rural Egyptian people's habits and lifestyles, including the value of the large family (*izwa*), and describing this particular segment of the population as exhibiting the three worst "problems," illiteracy, poverty, and overpopulation. However, I agree with Chambers (1983) that these so-called "multiple

problems," which most rural communities suffer from, could, in fact, be best described as "clusters of disadvantage," which certainly require an exceptional effort on the part of any government to overcome. As a matter of fact, tackling all these disadvantages requires changing the "political agenda" of most governments by "putting people first," rather than "putting them last," or even worse, simply ignoring them completely (Chambers, 1983). Ironically, however, many governments claim to be controlling the media for the purpose of improving the life of their people and doing what is best for them through overcoming these so-called "problems," while in reality, they are actually serving their own interests and executing their own plans and strategies, which are usually not very sensitive to people's true needs, conditions, and aspirations (ibid.). Therefore, most of these government-controlled campaigns do not achieve the desired results and are not successful in bringing about the desired changes. The Egyptian family planning campaign is no exception.

Another author, Fuglesang (1984) is equally critical of the patronizing, paternalistic attitude of those communicators who, because of their failure to understand the rationality of villagers, show a basic mistrust of people and point to their ignorance, superstition, and primitivism. He refers to this phenomenon as "the myth of people's ignorance." Similarly, Timothy Mitchell (1990) criticizes the "ahistorical method of explanation, in which the condition of rural Egypt is attributed not to political and economic forces of the day but to a timeless peasant mentality" (p. 137). He indicates that a multiplicity of social, political, and historical factors contribute to producing and reproducing, as well as inventing and reinventing, the distorted images and exaggerated stereotypes which contribute to framing the Egyptian peasant as belonging to a "timeless, primitive creature" (Mitchell, 1990). This is also in line with the notion that "traditional" society is conservative and, therefore, as Rogers (1976) pointed out in his discussion of the "subculture of peasantry," considered to be "backward" and to lack "innovativeness." In other words, "traditionalism," according to this view, is the main hindrance to development, and the "peasant," who is traditional by nature, is viewed as the antithesis of advancement and progress.

This discourse contributed, in turn, to legitimizing the developmental approach and family planning rationale proposed by international agencies, such as USAID, and echoed by local governments, who receive these agencies' aid, such as the Egyptian government. This approach aims to "push the family planning agenda . . . and to further advance the hegemonic logic of dominant social actors who frame questions of poor health in subaltern sectors in terms of individual lifestyle instead of addressing structural issues surrounding health inequities" (Pal & Dutta, 2008, p. 67). The same logic is echoed by Mitchell (2002), who argues that the overall social, economic, and political structures in contemporary Egypt, as well as the prevailing notions of development adopted by the regime, necessitated the reliance on the "rule of experts," whether they are foreign governments, international aid donors, or local elites, to attain the desired developmental goals, as outlined by the Egyptian government, and to comply with international population strategies, as determined by foreign agencies.

Through acknowledgement that, though communication is vital to the development of a nation, it is only one instrument in this process and not a magic element that can generate development by itself (Steeves, 1990), and through realizing that governments should avoid "using peasants as blank pages for their propaganda" (Freire, 1972, p. 72), this study aims to fill some of these gaps and to avoid some of these pitfalls. It aims to do so through capturing the complexity and the diversity of the women of Kafr

Masoud's gendered, maternal, and feminine identities on one hand, as well as the complexity of their meaning making processes and their activity as a media audience on the other hand.

By doing so, the study adopts a "postmodernist feminist" approach which deconstructs the traditional discourse of development and exposes its biases through affirming the "multiple realities" of women, particularly their situated, localized characters, by analyzing not just the element of "gender," but also other factors like ethnicity, race, class, and age, in an attempt to explain the relatively disadvantaged position of women in many parts of the world and their multifaceted experiences of subordination (Chowdhry, 1995). This is best achieved, as in the case of this study, through listening to Third World women's voices to reconstruct their realities within the international and intra-national systems of power, through stories in which Third World women speak for themselves, or through the speech of other authors "near-by" and "together-with," rather than "for" and "about," Third World women. This way, Third World women become "participants" in, rather than "recipients" of, the development process (ibid.).

Therefore, the adoption of this new postmodernist feminist perspective has a number of important implications in terms of challenging and questioning a lot of the traditional development assumptions and approaches which have been taken for granted in the past. Most importantly, for the purpose of this study, the new approach introduced a number of new dimensions and angles that help in redefining and rethinking the complex, interactive relationship between "gender," "communication," and "development," such as the multifaceted experiences of subordination, and the importance of reclaiming cultural and ethnic concerns (Parpart, 1995). By doing so, this new approach deconstructs the "reductionism" in the dominant development discourses of the past, with all its ethnocentrism, male bias, and urban bias (Riano, 1994). It is equally important, according to this perspective, to identify the changing and transitory nature of gendered identities. In other words, we should be looking at women as members of ethnic groups that are constantly redefining themselves, and which perceive multiple realities at once and embrace shifting identities, identities which tolerate contradictions and ambiguity (ibid.). It is in this spirit, and with these ideas in mind, that I explore the shifting gendered identities and multiple roles of the women of Kafr Masoud in this study. I argue that, in doing so, I adopted a new approach of "reversals in learning" (Chambers, 1983), which respects rural people's indigenous knowledge and attempts to "learn" from them, rather than "teach" them, through listening to their own voices and experiences. This was made possible through employing a qualitative, ethnographic methodology in this study, which included in-depth interviews, field observation, and focus group discussions.

New Audience, Angle, and Genre

The fact that the study was conducted on Egyptian rural women has special significance, since it allows the investigation of the impact of different values, traditions, and beliefs on the complex processes of media reception and meaning production in a culturally specific, non-Western context, and among a non-Western audience, one which has been invisible in previous audience research that has been largely conducted in Western contexts by Western scholars and focused mainly on Western audiences (Bausinger, 1984; Gray, 1992; Lull, 1990; Morley, 1986; Press, 1991).

In fact, I argue that Egyptian rural women suffer from multiple layers of "invisibility" (Gallagher, 2001; Okunna, 2005), even inside their own society, on three different levels: in developmental projects, in media coverage, and in media research, all of which have focused more on urban, rather than rural, Egyptian women (Abdel-Migeed, 1995; El-Abd, 1983; El-Hadeedy, 1985; Abdel-Nabi, 1995). The marginalization of this "subaltern" group (Dutta & Pal, 2007; Freire, 1972) is also coupled with the distortion of their mediated images, which, as some of the women in this study remarked, were either "too old fashioned and primitive," or "too modern and urbanized." In every case, they were either left out or misrepresented.

Although there is a growing trend in recent years to extend media research dealing with women to non-Western contexts, most of these studies mainly dealt with women's representation and portrayal in the media (Alat, 2006; Alozie, 2005; Khatib, 2004; Kutufam, 2005; Yang, 2003), women's roles as journalists and film-makers (Dabbous, 2004; Khiabany & Serberny, 2004; Salhi, 2004), or how women were affected by messages delivered to them through media campaigns (Sun, Zhang, Tsoh, Wong-Kim & Chow, 2007). In other words, they mainly focused on women's representation in the media, women as communicators, or the effects of the media on women, rather than on women as active interpreters of mediated messages. In fact, most of the studies tackling the theme of women's interpretation of mediated messages (Bissell, 2004; Press & Cole, 1995; Weaver, 2004), or how girls and women make meaning out of cultural experiences (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002), are still largely conducted in Western contexts and on Western audiences.

Moreover, the theme of social change and its interaction with the processes of media reception and message interpretation is still largely overlooked in many of these non-Western studies. Interestingly, even the few studies which tackled this theme dealt with how the process of social change has been portrayed in the media (Yunjuan & Xiaoming, 2007), rather than how it interacts and overlaps with women's own lived realities and their media reception and interpretation experiences. Only a few of these studies were conducted by women researchers on women audiences and tackled the issue of "gendered identities transformation and media reception, within the context of social change" (Sakamoto, 1999, p. 173), and even fewer of them tackled this theme using an ethnographic methodology (Kim, 2006), which highlights the fact that "ethnographic studies of television in everyday life are still relatively rare, and mostly conducted in a Western context" (Kim, 2006, p. 129).

The study also focuses on a largely overlooked media genre, i.e., "public awareness campaigns," to use the Egyptian government's terminology. This is especially important since most previous studies which explored women's reception of media content mainly dealt with genres such as soap operas, romantic novels, and girls' and women's magazines, music videos, and films (Ang, 1985; Hobson, 1982; Modleski, 1984; Radway, 1984). In fact, when attention to issues of gender began to develop in media studies under the impact of feminism in the mid-1970s, that attention was initially directed towards the textual analysis of these "women's genres" (Morley, 1992). Issues falling within the public sphere, such as news, current affairs, and cultural programs, have been largely underrepresented in most feminist media studies (Van Zoonen, 1994).

This study breaks away from these stereotypically feminine genres by focusing on women's reactions to governmental family planning campaigns and, therefore, extends the processes of media reception and meaning production beyond the "private" sphere, which has for long been defined as the women's sphere, to a broader "public" sphere, and links everyday "micro" issues in women's lives to a wider "macro" context (Khamis, 2004).

Therefore, the study contributes to audience research and feminist media theory through focusing on a relatively underrepresented audience, genre, theme, and methodology, which is particularly important in light of Dow and Condit's (2005) remark that "the growth of feminist scholarship that pays specific attention to race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and globalism is a heartening sign, although there is a need for much more of it, as well as a need for it to spread across methodological and content categories" (p. 467).

Research Setting and Sample

This study was conducted in the village of Kafr Masoud, close to the city of Tanta, in the Delta area in the north of Egypt. I chose to conduct the fieldwork in this village because I had some distant relatives in it. This helped me to gain access to women's homes and lives, to enjoy legitimacy, and to establish rapport, due to the importance of kinship relations and blood ties in small, conservative, rural communities. My relatives also enabled me to maintain a strong and continuous link with the village community. Therefore, although the fieldwork upon which this study is based was initially conducted in 1999, I was able to remain updated on the most recent developments and changes in the village, and to stay in contact with its people, mainly through my relatives there.¹

The village of Kafr Masoud, like most rural communities in Egypt, is characterized by a set of social and moral codes, including strong family ties, religious devotion and observance (all the village population is Muslim), conservative moral codes of behaviour, such as conservative dress codes for women, as well as a sex-segregated social environment. The village has a strong oral tradition. Therefore, despite the presence of modern mass media, such as radio and television, face-to-face, interpersonal communication has always been, and still continues to be, the most effective and powerful form of communication. This is clearly manifested in the effect of rumor, gossip, peer group pressure, and the influence of informal opinion leaders, such as family members, neighbors, and friends, on shaping women's views, attitudes, and decisions.

¹ I would like to draw the readers' attention to some changes that have taken place in the village recently, such as the increasing access to private satellite channels, which certainly affected the rate of exposure to televised content on national television channels, including the exposure to televised governmental family planning campaigns. These new factors certainly deserve further research and updated investigation. Yet, I argue that this study still has value and significance, due to the limited existing research on this particular audience, angle, and genre on one hand, and to the importance of using the findings of this study as a useful comparative context, against which new studies can be compared and contrasted, on the other hand.

Interestingly, modern mass media, especially television, are firmly embedded in these women's traditional, oral culture, since all the women in this study reported watching television with the rest of their families (Abu-Lughod, 1995) and engaging in discussions with them about the televised themes and programs. This collective pattern of television viewing provided an excellent forum for influencing women's opinions and attitudes, especially towards sensitive and controversial issues (Khamis, 2004).

The village witnessed a process of social change, starting in the early 1980s, which gave birth to a number of significant changes in women's roles and lives. First, the shift from agricultural to non-agricultural modes of production led to two interrelated and parallel shifts: the shift from informal to formal female education, and the shift from informal to formal female employment. These factors led to the exposure of formally educated and employed women to a different set of social relations, experiences, and contacts. Second, the shift from the "extended" to the "nuclear" family arrangement, which significantly increased the degree of autonomy and independence enjoyed by newly married women. All of these factors allowed younger women a better chance to assert their status, independence, autonomy, and individualism, which culminated in the formation of their new, modern identities (Khamis, 2004).

The 30 women who took part in my study were all married women and mothers in their childbearing years, since they were all between 18 and 45 years old. They were all selected using a "snowball" sampling technique, which was facilitated through my distant relatives and their contacts in the village. Targeting this particular group was based on the fact that the study tackled the issues of family planning and contraceptive use, which are much more relevant to this group of women. In fact, these "women's issues," as the women themselves called them, were restricted only to married women, due to the conservative moral codes in the village community, which made it very inappropriate for an unmarried woman to discuss such sensitive issues. Therefore, the fact that I was a married woman and a mother myself granted me access and legitimacy in this strictly feminine, maternal domain. Moreover, women who were much older either regarded these issues as irrelevant, or they had completely different experiences and frames of reference. Many of the much older women, for example, did not use any method of family planning during their childbearing years, and, therefore, either ridiculed the idea of contraceptive use, in principle, or refused to talk about in the first place.

Interestingly, the women appeared to be divided into two predominant groups. The first group mainly consisted of newly married women in their early and mid-twenties. Most of these women were formally educated. The majority of them held intermediate, secondary school diplomas, only two of them were university educated, and some of them had finished junior school or primary school only. Most of these women were also formally employed, i.e., they held full-time, or part-time paid jobs, either inside the village, or in the neighboring city of Tanta. Most of them lived in nuclear family households and had relatively better social class indicators, i.e., they had a reasonable family income, lived in red brick houses, and had a generally good standard of living. They had an average of two to three children, and none of them were considering having more children. Most of these women's husbands were also formally educated, some of them held university degrees, and the majority were formally employed in full-time, or part-time jobs, either inside or outside the village.

The second group consisted mainly of women in their late thirties to mid-forties, who had been married for more than 15 years, most of whom were formally illiterate or had dropped out of school without finishing their education. The majority of these women lived in extended family households with their in-laws and came from large families. Most of them had relatively low social class indicators, i.e., they had a low family income and no paid employment, lived in mud-brick houses, and had a generally low standard of living. They had an average of four to five children, and some of them were considering having more children. Most of these women's husbands were also formally illiterate or had dropped early out of school, and they were either full-time peasants, or they combined a part-time supplementary job with their main work in farming. There were, of course, some women who combined some of the common prevailing features and characteristics between these two groups. For example, there were some younger women who lived in extended family households and/or did not have good social class indicators, and there were some older women who lived in nuclear family households and/or had good social class indicators.

Interestingly, this division, which clearly emerged between the women, was not intentionally planned on my part as a researcher. In other words, I did not deliberately seek these two distinct groups of women to take part in my study. Rather, this was a pattern which emerged out of analyzing my data, and through investigating the common characteristics between the women in my study. At the same time, it was not a coincidental division either, but was a reflection of the different aspects of social change that have been taking place in the village since the early 1980s, which meant that formal female education and employment and the shift from extended to nuclear family households were prevalent among younger generations of women.

The women of Kafr Masoud, despite their differences, share many common characteristics as Egyptian rural women. The most prominent aspect of their shared identity is the great value which they attach to motherhood, which was clearly manifested in the amount of time and effort they devoted to their children, as well as in the tone of pride with which they spoke about them (Khamis, 2004). Beside their familial and maternal responsibilities, the women of Kafr Masoud also play a number of multifaceted roles within the village community, or what Caroline Moser (1993) describes as "women's triple roles:" the domestic, economic, and social roles, which are considered vital for their families' survival and well-being, and which take up most of these women's waking hours, leaving very little time for them to relax or enjoy leisure activities (Deem, 1986). Therefore, it can be argued that the differences between these women exist within a framework of shared similarities (Khamis, 2004).

Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative, ethnographic methodology, which relied on a "triangulation" of three research techniques: in-depth field observation, in-depth personal interviews, and focus group discussions. Therefore, the 30 women represent the group which took part in the in-depth interviews and the focus group discussions, but the scope of the study extended beyond the limitations of this group, through conducting in-depth participant observation, which covered various aspects of women's everyday

lives, their family relations, and their habits and patterns of television viewing, which yielded very rich, deep, and comprehensive data.

The process of naturalistic participant observation, which extended over a period of few months, required me to take part in different types of daily activities in the village, including baking, cleaning, helping out in important events like weddings, and helping children with their school homework. It was certainly a continuous and cyclical process, rather than something which only took place in the early phases of conducting my fieldwork. In other words, I discovered that I had to use my detailed fieldwork diary and to update my field-notes all the time in order to record important phrases and comments, and to keep track of important events and observations. Despite the fact that this was a very time- and effort-consuming data collection technique, it certainly proved to be very useful and effective. This is mainly because it yielded a significant amount of primary data about the village community and women's roles in it, in general, as well as women's patterns of media usage and television viewing habits, in particular, which could not have been obtained using any other method of data collection.

Additionally, this process turned out to be very useful in providing a solid background of naturalistic observations, against which the findings of other methods of data collection, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, could be checked and validated. It was certainly through my extended period of stay in the village, and my immersion in village life, that I was able to "document spontaneous, genuinely unselfconscious talk in naturalistic settings, rather than talk generated by interview alone" (Gillespie, 1995, p. 66).

However, in-depth, personal interviews also proved to be a very useful and strong method of data collection, taking into account that "in-depth interviewing is the most popular method in feminist media studies and cultural studies, particularly in research on audiences" (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 136). The significance of in-depth interviews in my study could be attributed to a number of reasons.

First, the interviews helped in shedding light on complex aspects of women's lives. In fact, they provided rich life-narratives, personal histories, and testimonials, which supplied many interesting facts and stimulating stories about these women and their lives, in a way which I did not initially anticipate before conducting these interviews. Second, the interviews provided a very useful background about some of the aspects of social change in village life, in general, and women's changing roles and identities, in particular. This was especially important in terms of making comparisons and contrasts between past and present beliefs, attitudes, and practices among different generations. Third, since qualitative research is different from a survey, where the same questions are asked of each respondent, and where the answers are usually standardized, my respondents often surprised me with insightful remarks, new comments, and exciting stories, which made the conversation much more rich, lively, and diverse than I initially anticipated, and made each interview a unique and distinctive experience.

Each of the in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which lasted between two and three hours, on average, was conducted in the respondents' homes. However, there were a few cases where I started an interview with a woman at her home and had to complete it later on the same day, or on a different day, in another place, whether in one of her neighbors' homes, in the fields, or even in the market, due to the many sources of distraction and interruption resulting from women's numerous chores. I was always keen to start each interview with an informal introduction, an act which highlighted my kinship ties and family connections with one of the most well-known families in the village. This created the desired degree of rapport and trust, which was of crucial importance in terms of improving the quality of the interview and ensuring its success and effectiveness.

My detailed, semi-structured interview agenda consisted of three major parts. The first part discussed the respondents' personal and social life; the second part focused on their patterns, habits, and preferences of television viewing; and the third part focused on their viewing of the televised family planning campaigns and their reactions to them.

In addition to conducting in-depth participant observation and in-depth interviews, I also conducted four focus group sessions. Two of these sessions had seven women each, and the other two had eight women each. In each one of these sessions, a videotaped recording of the various announcements on family planning was displayed, followed by a discussion which elicited the women's views and comments. In order to prompt these discussions and to keep them in focus, I prepared a "focus group discussion agenda," which included a number of questions related to women's decoding of the messages and their reflections on the main themes and characters in them. Additionally, in order to trigger and stimulate discussions between women in these focus groups, I sometimes had to probe with a series of questions to find out their real views and attitudes on certain issues. This proved to be particularly useful in eliciting more participation from women and in urging them to engage in heated and controversial debates around various issues.

The focus groups were also held in women's homes. Sitting with the women in my study in a circle on a dusty floor, which was usually covered by an old rag or a torn mat, I usually made more than "my feet dirty," in the literal, rather than just the metaphorical, sense. I chose to organize the focus groups this way to bridge the gap and lessen the hierarchy of differences between myself and the women in my study. This arrangement not only made the relationship warmer, closer, and more egalitarian, it also made the set-up much more naturalistic, since this is how these women always sat and talked together in their everyday lives. All these factors facilitated women's articulation of their views and enabled them to express their opinions in a much more open and free manner.

The focus group discussions proved to be very constructive and fruitful in instigating interesting discussions, not just around the televised messages, but also around more general subjects, such as women's personal lives, needs, and interests. This enhanced my understanding of these women's gendered roles and identities, as well as their patterns of television viewing.

Taking into account that the women in my study shared common features and a common location, as a result of belonging to the same village community, I tried to take advantage of their natural locations and their strong common bonds by not dividing them into separate homogeneous groups based on socio-demographic characteristics like age or education while conducting the focus group discussions. Rather, I preferred to have them join mixed and overlapping focus groups representing different categories of respondents. This proved to be very useful in terms of triggering interesting spontaneous discussions, heated debates, and controversies, as well as in eliciting many contrasting and conflicting responses, whether between the participating women in the focus groups, or between the answers given by the same woman in different contexts.

The "triangulation" of these three data gathering techniques increased the depth, comprehensiveness, and "validity" of the collected data through enabling the comparison of women's responses across multiple contexts, particularly in the case of some women who gave comments and remarks during focus group discussions which were very different from what they told me earlier in individual, in-depth interviews, in order to project more favorable and socially acceptable images of themselves in front of other women. The greatest strength of adopting this "triangulation" approach, therefore, is that multiple methods of data collection "will modify the weaknesses of each individual method and thus greatly enhance the quality and value of interpretative research projects . . . they also augment the likelihood that a variety of perspectives have been brought into the examination and analysis" (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 139).

I argue that the reliance on this feminist, ethnographic approach is an "empowering" strategy which allows members of subaltern, marginalized groups, such as the women of Kafr Masoud, to talk and to be heard. Therefore, I am keen to give the women in my study a "voice" through allowing them to narrate their different experiences with motherhood, femininity, and family planning within their own discursive frameworks and in their own words. This implies the adoption of a "feminist insight that suggests a need to recover previously silenced voices" (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002, p. 141).

Moreover, I believe that the reliance on a quantitative methodological approach, through using large-scale audience surveys, for example, would have been unsuitable and inapplicable, and even misleading, in this study, due to a number of factors related to the nature of this audience group. Some of these factors are the conservative social atmosphere in the village community, which limits access to women's homes and lives, as well as the high rate of formal illiteracy among women in the village, which would have made the use of the survey method an alienating experience for most of them. In other words, they would have either been discouraged to take part in the study in the first place, or they would have provided stereotypical, distorted answers, which would not have reflected their true opinions.

Interestingly, I also came to realize that the women of Kafr Masoud tend to have what I describe as a "narrative," rather than a "numerical" or a "factual" memory. In other words, it is much easier for them to narrate events and to tell stories about their most important subjects and personal matters, while it is usually difficult for them, in contrast, to recall specific dates, figures, or accurate facts. This observation makes the use of the ethnographic approach particularly useful and fruitful, since it allows them to present their life-histories, narratives, and testimonials openly and freely, and it also makes the experience of "TV talk" (Gillespie, 1995) part of their natural, everyday talking and chatting. In other words, in line with the findings of Gray (1992), I discovered that "many of the women eagerly told me many stories about their family histories and their present lives, enjoying the opportunity to talk about themselves to an interested listener" (p. 33). This, in turn, helped in providing a more accurate and comprehensive picture of their personal lives and television experiences.

This attempt to increase the empowerment and visibility of this group of women was made possible through the process of "TV talk," which, according to Marie Gillespie (1995), "is a crucial forum for experimentation with identities . . . Common experiences of TV supply referents and contexts for talk . . . about identities and identity positions" (p. 23). It is also possible, according to Gillespie (1995), to say things through "TV talk" which would be otherwise difficult, if not impossible, to say, bearing in mind that "'TV talk' — the embedding of TV experiences in conversational forms and flows — becomes a feasible object of study only when fully ethnographic methods are used in audience research" (ibid.).

An important ethical dilemma which always confronts researchers doing this type of ethnographic research is the issue of anonymity (Gillespie, 1995; Gray, 1992). It is a common practice in many ethnographic studies to conceal the name of the site where the fieldwork was conducted and to give it a fictitious name, something which I felt was unnecessary. In fact, I wanted to give some credit and recognition to a village, whose people were so helpful, friendly, and generous, in terms of giving of themselves, their lives, their time, and even their limited daily resources, in terms of providing food and shelter. Additionally, mentioning the real name of the research site adds a degree of realism and genuineness to the ethnographic research process (Abu-Lughod, 2005). However, I managed to conceal the identities of my research participants by changing their real names and, therefore, avoiding the potentiality of any harm or damage they might suffer from as a result of revealing their real names. I felt that this was especially important, since the study tackled some sensitive issues, like contraceptive use and family planning, and touched upon some personal details of the respondents' lives, who recalled their personal experiences, narratives, and episodes freely and openly throughout this study. I, therefore, felt obliged as a researcher to reciprocate their openness, frankness, and generosity in providing these genuine accounts with an adequate degree of confidentiality and protection of their privacy.

I was also keen throughout the research process to keep my promise of confidentiality to my research participants by not sharing their personal secrets, intimate stories, or even confessions, with anyone in the village community. This was especially important to safeguard the relationship of mutual respect, trust, and rapport between us. I was also keen to be as open and frank as possible in explaining

the research process to them, as well as in answering any questions or inquiries they might have to the best of my knowledge.

Moreover, "interpretative researchers" conducting this type of ethnographic studies are often confronted with concerns about subjective and biased interpretations. As Van Zoonen (1994) rightly points out, the inequalities between the feminist researcher and her research subjects are not only particularly acute in the actual observations of and encounters with the women participating in the research, but also in the phase of conjuring up and writing down their experiences into a story about the research results. In that sense, I felt that the power differentials between me and my sample, which included the fact that I was an educated, middle-class, urban woman, who had a professional and academic career, were further enhanced due to the fact that I was also the "researcher," who had the authority to observe them, interview them, make them attend organized focus group sessions, and, most importantly, write about them and interpret their own words and actions. Therefore, I had my concerns as to how fair and accurate I was in terms of writing about these women and drawing a realistic picture of their lives. These concerns were more pressing due to the fact that the data gathering process was entirely conducted in Arabic, which means that I had to translate these women's original words, comments, and even some of the proverbs and jokes they used into English. This always invites the danger of losing some of the meaning in the process of translation. Also, the fact that many of my research participants were illiterate or had very little formal education, and that none of them knew any English, meant that I was not able to make them read my final study and decide for themselves how accurate and representative it was of their own words, narratives, and daily lives. In other words, I did not have the option of allowing my research participants to cross-check or validate the final outcome of my study and judge for themselves its accuracy and fairness in reflecting their experiences.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that my power as a researcher does not completely overrule the power of my research subjects, or participants, as I prefer to call them, since my power to write about them, represent them, and interpret their own words and actions could be said to be balanced out by their own power to "choose to say," or to "choose not to say" certain things, and, most importantly, their own willingness or unwillingness to take part in this study in the first place.

Analytical Framework

The study relied on Stuart Hall's (1980) "encoding/decoding model," which links the media receivers' identity positions to their differential interpretations of media texts, as the main analytical framework for investigating how these women made meaning around four key themes in four televised family planning announcements, which were displayed to them on videotape through the organized focus group discussions. These themes were the following: promoting the image of the small family as the ideal family; encouraging the husband's active participation in family planning; promoting the value of seeking specialized medical advice, especially before the discontinuation of the used contraceptive method; and warning against listening to rumors and informal advice in contraceptive matters.

The first theme of the "small family as the ideal family" was advocated through a televised announcement highlighting the social, economic, and health benefits of having a small family, through

portraying a happy, young, urban couple who agreed to have only two children: a son and a daughter. The husband and wife were both educated, and they enjoyed a good standard of living and a quiet and stable family life.

The second theme of the husband's active participation in family planning was highlighted through an announcement featuring a rural man who agreed to accompany his wife to the family planning clinic in the village to see the female doctor, and to listen to the doctor's advice regarding the couple's shared family planning responsibilities.

The third theme of promoting the value of authoritative, medical knowledge and discouraging the discontinuation of contraceptive use without consulting the doctor was advocated through the episode of a woman who stopped taking the contraceptive pill during her husband's absence, without prior medical consultation, and, therefore, ended up with an undesired and unplanned pregnancy.

The fourth theme of warning against rumors and informal advice in family planning matters was promoted through the episode of a woman who wanted to plan her family after having two children, but was reluctant to do so because of hearing many rumors about the side-effects of contraceptive methods. One of this woman's close relatives, who happened to be a young, female medical student, advised her to go to the family planning clinic to seek the right medical advice, rather than listening to misleading rumors.

I argue that Stuart Hall's (1980) "encoding/decoding model" is most suitable for interpreting these women's differential readings of the four themes in the previously mentioned family planning announcements, since it offers a "useful starting point from which to understand transactions that occur between texts and audiences" (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002, p. 146). The reliance on this analytical framework is in line with this study's feminist orientation and its special focus on the interaction between identity construction and meaning production, taking into account that "the politics of identity have long been central to feminist media scholarship" (Carter & McLaughlin, 2006).

In this model, Hall (1980) argues that the dominant readings, which are in line with the original meaning of the media message and internalize the "dominant ideology" in the text, are produced when the values, beliefs, and identity positions of both the senders and the receivers of a message are "symmetrical." On the other hand, oppositional readings, which resist the "dominant ideology" in media texts and diverge from it, are produced when there is an "asymmetry" or "lack of equivalence" between the encoders and the decoders of media messages, due to the gap between the values, beliefs, and perceptions of both parties. Finally, negotiated readings occupy a middle position between the two poles of acceptance and rejection of the dominant ideology in a mediated text, and they usually take place when members of the audience accept the dominant ideology in the text in principle, but adopt situationally adapted (Morley, 1980) and negotiated codes of interpretation, which diverge away from this dominant ideology in practice, due to one or more factors. It is this emphasis on taking into account the overall ideological, social, and cultural context of the communication process, and its impact on the audience members' ability to interpret the media content in different ways, which makes Hall's encoding/decoding model of particular relevance and significance to this study.

However, through exploring a complex matrix of factors affecting the interrelated processes of identity construction and meaning production in this study, I adopt the position that "identity expression is not a linear act of encoding and decoding but a complex process in which . . . meanings are expressed, evaluated, affirmed, and refuted" (Witteborn, 2007, p. 573), and that "decoding is also determined by the audience's cultural references . . . education, ideology, religion, ethics, gender, class, ethnicity, and so on. Decoding is always at work; the audience is never 'passive'" (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002, p. 146). Therefore, I attempt to investigate the interplay of these highly interconnected and overlapping factors in constructing the women of Kafr Masoud's complex subjectivities, as an active and interactive audience, which are, in turn, reflected in their differential reading positions, i.e., whether they come up with dominant, oppositional, or negotiated readings of the mediated texts.

Dominant Readings, Modern Identities: Resisting Traditional Reproduction Norms

Most of the dominant readings came from the formally educated and employed women, who were mostly newly married, and between the ages of 18 and 26 years. Most of these women's husbands were also formally educated and employed. Most of them lived in nuclear family households and had relatively better social class indicators, compared to the rest of the village population. They had an average of two children, and none of them were considering having more children.

These women were generally satisfied with the number of children they had, and they felt that having more children would only be an additional "burden" on their shoulders, because they had to struggle with their domestic burdens, as well as the additional burdens imposed on them by their jobs, especially since most of them lived in nuclear family households, and, therefore, "had to do everything all by themselves without any help," as one woman put it.

Interestingly, the shift from the extended to the nuclear family household structure turned out to be a double-edged sword for these young women. On one hand, it meant less help and support for them in their everyday domestic chores, but on the other hand, it granted them more autonomy, especially in reproductive decisions, and enabled them to resist pressures from dominant figures in their husbands' families, such as the mother-in-law. Most of them gave comments like: "I am so lucky that only me and my husband can decide how many children we can have," and "I am glad I escaped from possible confrontations with my mother-in-law over whether or not I should get pregnant again."

These women mostly endorsed the concept of "the small family as the ideal family." They valued the different health, social, and economic advantages of family planning, which were highlighted in a televised announcement featuring a young urban couple who had only two children. Most of them said that they thought about the three advantages highlighted in this announcement when they decided to plan their own families: protecting their health, having a happy and stable family life, and enjoying a better standard of living. These women also realized the importance of spacing children, in order to give them better care and education, as well as the significance of planning and saving for the future, which means that they prioritized deferred over immediate gratifications. This is in line with the findings of Diana Gittins (1982), that one of the differences between working women and those who stayed at home was

that the former generally adopted "arguments for having fewer children on the grounds of health, education, and the desire to maintain a certain standard of living" (p. 155).

These women also mentioned other advantages of family planning, which were not mentioned in this announcement, such as looking after their bodies, preserving their beauty, protecting their health, and having some leisure time for themselves. This is best summarized in the following quotation:

If a couple decides to have two children only, as shown in this announcement, they will enjoy a comfortable and happy life. I also think that a woman has to look after her health, and she has to be tidy, clean, and beautiful in order to be attractive in her husband's eyes. It is not possible for her to do so if she has many children . . . she must also try to have some spare time for herself if she can . . . after all, she is a human being, not a machine. (Ibtisam, aged 24, mother of two)

The above quotation, which draws an interesting link between the discourses of motherhood and femininity, is a direct reflection of these young women's changing attitude towards motherhood, which is no longer defined as a totally "self-sacrificing" mission. These women, who generally enjoy better status, more decision-making power, and more control over household resources, developed a more "individualistic" orientation towards motherhood, which is, in turn, reflected in their changing perceptions of the image of the "ideal mother." While still defining themselves as "good and responsible mothers," and while fulfilling all their domestic, childcare, and reproductive roles and responsibilities, these women also acknowledged their legitimate rights to satisfy both materialistic and emotional needs. However, although formal education and employment widened the scope of their alternatives beyond the limits of the traditional role of mother and wife, these alternatives were always considered "beside," rather than "instead of," this role.

While sharing the common identity of motherhood, which was never challenged or questioned by any of the women in my study, these women were gradually "transforming and translating" their identities (Gillespie, 1995), through engaging in new feminine and maternal discourses, and through resisting the traditional ideology of motherhood by posing "some challenge to the idea of the 'all-giving,' 'selfless' player of a prescribed role" (Wearing, 1984, p. 60). This shift to the new view of the mother as an "autonomous individual" highlights that "notions of motherhood and 'good mothering' are highly variable . . . From the moment of birth, motherhood is a social construction" (Gittins, 1993, p. 67).

These women also came up with new constructions of femininity, which emphasized the image of the "ideal woman" as someone who is "slim, tidy, clean, and beautiful," and considered these qualities essential for attracting husbands. They felt that "a woman should not be just a rabbit or a reproductive machine," as one respondent puts it. These new constructions of femininity, which stress physical beauty and attractiveness, or what Beverly Skeggs (1997) describes as "glamour and desirability," were mainly influenced by media images, since most of these women mentioned that they "dreamt of looking like the actresses on TV," or "the models in fashion magazines."

This highlights the role of cultural products and mediated images in the construction of femininity (Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine, 1984), as well as the value of examining "intertextuality" (Fiske, 1987) by taking into account "the audience's cultural references when studying the interactions between representation, identity, and consumption, and between the text and the audience" (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002, p. 157).

These findings are also related to these women's age group, which dictated certain priorities, since my study revealed that "concern with appearance was a preoccupation for most of the women when they were younger, but . . . became less central when they had children and made greater investments elsewhere" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 103).

Interestingly, some of the women who worked in the nearby city of Tanta mentioned that their discussions with some of their colleagues at work and reading some of the newspapers and magazines, which they occasionally borrowed from them, encouraged them to plan their families. Their formal education and employment enabled them to have more autonomy in terms of gaining access to alternative sources of knowledge and information, which were not totally mediated through male members of the family, such as reading some religious books which granted legitimacy to the concept of family planning. Therefore, these women's views were a direct reflection of their relocation in a different place on the "social and cultural map" (Grossberg, 1996), as a result of their new sphere of urban social networks, which exposed them to new discourses and frames of reference. This shows that "identity is concerned with who we are and where we are placed in time and space" (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002, p. 143).

These newly constructed identities placed these women within the mainstream position, which adopts the hegemonic, dominant family planning ideology and resists traditional reproduction norms. This indicates that "both education and income improve women's power vis-à-vis husbands to implement choices in distribution and control of resources, including their labour and fertility" (Lynch & Fahmy, 1984, p. 45), which reminds us that "power has multiple and simultaneous meanings that operate in everyday life" (Aldoory, 2005, p. 675), and clearly shows "how cultural competencies are distributed through divisions of gender" (Gray, 1992, p. 24).

Most of these women took special pride in their formal education and their husbands' education, and they saw it as the basis for their consultation and shared decision making around all matters, including family planning. Most of them spoke proudly about their "educated and open-minded husbands," who discussed all issues related to family planning with them, and who didn't mind accompanying them to see a doctor, as shown in one of the announcements, which featured a rural husband who accompanied his wife to see the female doctor in the local health clinic and to seek her advice on family planning matters. Most of these women praised this man's attitude and said that he was a "wise," "educated," and "intelligent" man.

This prioritization of the value of education was also reflected in their admiration of the young, urban couple in the "small family" announcement, because "they were educated." This shows how members of the audience could develop "psychological identification through the projection of personal characteristics onto TV characters" (Fiske, 1987, p. 169).

Interestingly, these women also attacked the woman in another announcement who discontinued using the pills without consulting the doctor for "being uneducated," although this was not mentioned in the announcement. They felt that "it [was] unlikely that an educated woman would make such a mistake." Therefore, these women, in their struggle to assert their own "modern" identity, value, and legitimacy as formally educated women, have, in fact, resisted and excluded "other" women who did not invest in the same identity position or inhabit the same discourse. This clearly indicates that identity construction is "a dynamic concept based on symbolic characteristics that attempt to differentiate in order to identify" (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002, p. 143), and that we "define our identity on the basis of difference. In other words, we are what we are *not*" (pp. 156-157).

These women also internalized the dominant ideology regarding the importance of seeking specialized medical advice and consulting the doctor in all family planning aspects. They strongly condemned the woman in one of the announcements who stopped using the pills without consulting the doctor, and they described her behaviour as "faulty and unwise." In granting legitimacy to the concept of seeking specialized medical advice, they simultaneously discredited listening to rumors and informal advice. In other words, in prioritizing expert, institutionalized, and specialized knowledge systems, these women actually resisted indigenous, traditional knowledge systems, which is another reflection of how their identities are shifting from "tradition" to "modernity." Most of these women gave comments like:

People often exaggerate and distort information . . . you would be unwise just to follow anything you hear. The most important thing, of course, is to get "specialized" medical advice from an "expert" . . . so a wise woman should always consult doctors, rather than following what others say blindly. (Ibtisam, aged 24, mother of two)

This prioritization of specialized medical advice is a direct outcome of these young women's personal experiences, since most of them reported going to the female doctor in the local health clinic in the village to seek family planning advice. This opportunity was not available to older women, who had to rely on the *daya* (traditional birth attendant) before this service became available in the village. This highlights how the personal experience of the respondent could be, in turn, "read back" into the interpretation of mediated messages (Buckingham, 1996; Fiske, 1987; Livingstone, 1990).

The picture emerging from the previous discussion is that of a new generation of educated, working women, who take pride in their own education and their husbands' education, and who perceive other sources of status and power "beside" their motherhood. Most of these women largely adopted the hegemonic family planning ideology, as presented on television, regarding the acceptance of the notion of the small family, the importance of seeking medical advice and abandoning rumors, as well as granting legitimacy to shared decision-making and consultation in family planning matters between the husband and wife. Ironically, by conforming to this "dominant" family planning ideology, these young women were actually opposing the prevailing family planning norms in their own village community and deviating away from them. In other words, their readings of these messages could be considered "oppositional" to the socio-cultural patterns of reproduction in their own community, although they are "dominant readings," when it comes to endorsing the hegemonic ideology on television.

Oppositional Readings, Traditional Identities: Resisting Hegemonic Family Planning

Most of the oppositional readings came from older women, who were between 38 and 45 years old, and who were not formally educated or employed. These women mainly defined their status, power, and prestige according to the number of children they had, which was an average of five children. They felt that it was their duty to give their husbands the number of children they wanted, especially male children. This was considered their main source for securing status in the family and achieving security in their marriage. This is directly linked to the importance of fertility in Egyptian rural women's lives, and the special importance which they attach to giving birth to sons, in particular, taking into account the fact that "in Egypt the higher status of male children is reinforced by various . . . traditions" (Warwick, 1982, pp. 110-111).

Therefore, these women considered family planning a "last resort," which they could turn to in the case of severe economic or health necessities. Most of them gave comments like: "Children are the greatest source of joy and the most important thing in life" and "If it was not for our poor financial situation, we would have certainly desired more children." The great value which they attach to having children, especially sons, even at the expense of their own health, in many cases, is strongly emphasized in the absence of other sources of personal status and self-fulfilment, such as having an educational degree or a paid job.

For many of these women, having a son was the best way to "tie the husband and achieve security in marriage," as one woman put it. Other women in this group gave comments like:

A woman who does not give birth to children is like a tree which does not yield fruits . . . she will always be lonely . . . and insecure in her marriage . . . her husband will escape from her and find another woman who could give him children. (Magda, aged 42, mother of nine)

Interestingly, although all women in my study felt threatened by the possibility of losing their husbands to other women, they had different reasons for these fears. These ranged from the loss of physical attractiveness and beauty, in the cases of younger women, to infertility or the inability to satisfy their husbands' needs for more children, in the cases of older women. These different fears were, in turn, reflected in the different strategies which these women used to "get and keep a man" (Walkerline, 1984).

This reproductive role also has special value and significance as a strong weapon, which these women, who were mostly poor, uneducated, and unemployed, could use in the face of their husbands' economic superiority. This is reflected in the popular Arabic proverb, which I heard several times in my conversations with these women: "If he conquers you with money, conquer him with children!" Therefore, these women are ready to tolerate any type of pain or suffering which could be associated with fulfilling their reproductive role, since they see it as part of their "natural role" in life (Khattab, 1995). This "passive

suffering" (Rich, 1977) is accepted by these women as their only right of passage to consolidating their power and status, and as a fair price which should be paid in order to achieve security.

These women's tendencies to put themselves last in everything is an extension of their perceived "natural role" in life, as loving and giving mothers, whose "mode of moral judgement is centred on caring" (Gilligan, 1982). In fact, despite all their sacrifices and the enormous amount of time and effort they devote to their families and children, most of them rarely complain. Their sacrificing attitude was evident in the main justification which most of them gave for using birth control methods, which was to "have the health and the strength to serve the children and look after the family," as one woman put it. However, "none of them was refusing motherhood altogether, or asking for an easy life" (Rich, 1977, p. 30).

These women's ideological orientation towards motherhood is, therefore, "collectivist," rather than "individualistic," and it does not recognize any alternatives to, or even beside, the role of wife and mother. These women mainly believed that a "woman's place is in 'the home' . . . that a 'good' mother is the one who puts her children first at all times" (Wearing, 1984, p. 76). For these women "the display of selflessness is crucial to their production of their caring selves. Their self is for others" (Skeggs, 1997, pp. 64-65).

Interestingly, some of these women came up with an extremely oppositional reading of the "small family" announcement featuring the happy urban couple. They read into the message that "the ideal family should have both a 'son' and a 'daughter,' just like this happy family," rather than having "only two" children, which is the intended message in this announcement. This is a clear indication of the "lack of symmetry" and "lack of equivalence" (Hall, 1980) between the encoders and the decoders of this message.

The fact that most of these women lived in extended family households, and they originally came from large families themselves, also had an effect on their perception of the ideal family size, and their preference for large, rather than small, families. The majority of these women felt that "a large family is a great source of power, solidarity, and cooperation," as one respondent remarked. This is mainly due to the importance of the concept of *Izwa* (the large family) in rural Egypt (El-Abd, 1983; Warwick, 1982; Inhorn, 1994). In fact, the multiple values of children in these women's eyes are not only limited to achieving status, through the power and prestige of having a large family, but also include the economic utility and contributions of children, the importance of achieving security in old age, asserting the sexual identities of both parents, and the desire to enjoy children (Inhorn, 1994; Warwick, 1982).

Most of these women adopted a strong "fatalistic orientation" towards the issue of childbirth for two reasons. The first is due to their strong religious convictions, which made it "wrong not to want children, since this could lead to God's wrath," as one woman put it, which can be manifested in "permanent infertility, poverty, or bad fortune." These religious convictions had a strong effect on these women's perception of their degree of control over their own patterns of reproduction. They strongly believed that "because God ultimately controls procreation, it is his decision to give children or not to give children" (Inhorn, 1994, p. 212). In light of this view, it is really not up to anyone, except God, how many children a woman will end up having. Second, this deeply-rooted fatalism and belief in "predestination"

(Sullivan & Korayem, 1981) was also reinforced by the nature of these women's agricultural activities and the seasonal, changeable nature of their agricultural income.

This fatalistic orientation was reflected in comments like: "Whenever a child is born, God allocates a predestined sum of money for it," and "No child will ever starve or die from hunger. If God brought her/him to life, He will also be responsible for feeding it." That's why these women criticized the young urban couple in the "small family" announcement for not having more children, since they "have enough money," and "they already bought everything they need."

In other words, unlike the women who came up with dominant readings, these women prioritized "immediate" over "deferred" gratifications, and did not acknowledge the value of saving money and planning for the future. They also prioritized the economic factor as the main determinant for the use of contraceptive methods, rather than health or social factors. The differences exhibited by these women are attributed to their different social, historical, and temporal locations, which influenced their ideologies and identity positions, and which, in turn, shaped their differential readings (Gillespie, 1995; Grossberg, 1996; Hall, 1996).

The fact that most of these women lived in extended family households, in addition to the prevailing pattern of collective television viewing in the village, provided an excellent opportunity for authoritative figures in the family, such as the husband and the mother-in-law, to shape these women's views and attitudes towards the sensitive issue of family planning. This is reflected in the following quotation:

Every time I watch television with my husband and my mother-in-law, and one of the family planning announcements happens to be aired, they do not miss the chance to tell me that this is only a lot of "nonsense," . . . and that a woman's main role in life is to be a mother, therefore, the more children she has, the better. (Nawal, aged 42, mother of five)

This highlights the importance of taking into account the "modes of reception of television" (Morley, 1986, 1992; Gray, 1992; Buckingham, 1996; Fiske, 1987), and it reminds us that we can not detach the process of making meaning from the specific context in which it takes place. In fact, "it is the essentially oral forms of television that allows it to be embedded so firmly in the social-cultural life of its viewers, and that enables such an active, participatory, selective set of reading relations" (Fiske, 1987, p. 107). Other respondents gave comments like:

I heard from my husband that family planning is religiously forbidden . . . every time we watch one of the family planning spots together, he makes such a remark. He told me that a woman who uses contraceptive methods . . . challenges God's will. He said that he heard this from the *Imam* (the religious preacher) in the local mosque in the village . . . I don't know . . . maybe he is right. (Fakiha, aged 38, mother of six)

Beside highlighting the impacts of informal, face-to-face communication and the context of television viewing on shaping women's views on the issue of family planning, the above quotation also highlights the

confinement of these women to the domestic sphere, which has denied them the opportunity to access alternative sources of information on important matters, such as the religious legitimacy of family planning. Due to the fact that the mosque is mainly a "male domain" in rural Egypt (Lynch & Fahmy, 1984), these women had to rely on their husbands as their prime sources of obtaining religious information. This, in turn, affected their attitudes towards family planning.

These women strongly resisted the dominant ideology of "men's active participation in family planning," as presented in the televised announcements. They considered it very shameful and socially inappropriate for a man to go to a "women's clinic" in a sex-segregated, conservative, rural community, like the village of Kafr Masoud. They felt that this could make the man "a target of gossip," especially in a small community which has a strong oral tradition. This could be attributed to the prevailing socio-cultural context in rural Egypt, which determines socially acceptable norms of reproduction, and prescribes or proscribes certain fertility behaviours and practices (Inhorn, 1994; Warwick, 1982; Mies & Shiva, 1993).

These women, therefore, came up with a totally oppositional reading of the message featuring the rural man who accompanied his wife to see the female doctor. They read into the message that "this man was actually against the notion of family planning, but the female doctor was trying to put pressure on him to accept it." Other women criticized this man because "he seems to have a weak personality," and because "he is simply a passive man who follows his wife's steps." These criticisms were not based on the fact that the man accepted, in principle, to accompany his wife to the clinic, but rather, because he did not take the "initiative" to go. In other words, they considered it very inappropriate for the wife to take the initiative and to tell her husband what he should do and where he should go. Other women described him as a "movie character," i.e., a character which seemed "too good to be true." This is due to the underlying social norms and gender socialization patterns, which highlight the qualities of passiveness and helplessness as favorable feminine traits, and, therefore, discourage women from taking initiative, an act which is perceived as masculine (Walkerdine, 1984).

These women also resisted the notion that it is wrong to discontinue using the contraceptive method without consulting the doctor first. Interestingly, the woman's personal experience emerged as the main factor shaping her reading of this message. Those who listened to an informal advice from a relative or a friend regarding the safety of discontinuing the used method of contraception, but ended up with an unwanted pregnancy themselves, read into an announcement, featuring a woman who did the same thing, that "it is not this woman's fault that she got pregnant. It is the fault of those who gave her the wrong advice."

This oppositional reading is actually an attempt by these women to free themselves of any blame or responsibility for their unwanted pregnancies, through considering themselves "victims" and transferring the blame to others. This highlights "the role of social experience in the construction of the subject and how this subjectivity is, in turn, the site of making meaning" (Fiske, 1987, p. 60).

Other women, who had a positive experience in terms of discontinuing the used method of contraception without consulting the doctor, but without getting pregnant, came up with another oppositional reading of this message. They attributed what happened to the woman in this announcement

to pure "misfortune." They gave comments like: "She just wanted to take some rest. I do not see anything wrong with that . . . I just think she was unlucky." This reading perfectly reflects the deeply-rooted "fatalistic orientation" which prevails widely among this group of women.

The most extreme oppositional reading of this message, however, came from women who did not mind having more children, i.e., those who deliberately discontinued using contraceptive methods, without consulting the doctor and without worrying about getting pregnant. These women read into this message that:

This woman did the right thing . . . she took rest, and she also went to the doctor to consult her. In fact, the doctor told her that she could have as many children as she wants, and that she should go to her anytime to discontinue using the contraceptive method. (Gamalat, aged 45, mother of six)

This stark example of the "asymmetry" and "lack of equivalence" (Hall, 1980) between the encoders and the decoders of this message reminds us of the fact that "discourses . . . are socially produced, therefore, it could be said that we do not speak our discourses, but our discourses speak us" (Fiske, 1987, p. 15).

Most of these women also came up with oppositional readings of a message which warned against listening to informal advice and rumors in family planning matters. Some women read into this message that the young, medical student in this announcement was actually "warning her relative against the dangers of using contraceptive methods," instead of warning her against "listening" to rumors about these methods, as originally intended in this announcement. Interestingly, they even cited many rumors which they themselves heard and believed about the potential dangers of using birth control methods.

This highlights the power of various forms of oral culture, such as rumor and gossip, which are firmly embedded in the prevailing norms and traditions in this rural community, in effectively challenging the dominant ideology propagated through television. This is especially true in the case of the sensitive issue of family planning, in general, and the issue of discontinuing the used method of contraception, in particular, since, "in many countries, the most potent assault on continuation came from the most elusive of sources, rumor. Unable to attack openly, detractors took to whispers, insinuation, and tale telling" (Warwick, 1982, p. 37).

In every case, these women prioritized the value of listening to "trusted sources" and "voices of experience" in "women's matters," and they resisted the superiority of medical expertise. They said that "it is always better for a woman to listen to those who have more experience," and most of them cited the popular Arabic proverb: "Asking an experienced person is better than asking a doctor," to support their argument. They also said that a woman should preferably seek advice from someone "who knows her very well, such as her mother, aunt, or mother-in-law," and they felt that this was much better than seeking "general advice from the doctor, who doesn't know anything about her."

This prioritization of the value of informal advice from trusted voices of experience in reproductive matters is, in fact, a reflection of these women's prioritization of the value of their own

alternative, indigenous knowledge systems, as valid and viable options, in the face of the superiority of institutionalized, formal, expert systems. This is a clear manifestation of their assertion of their own authentic values, legitimacy, and identity, through resisting society's hegemonic values and belief systems (Khamis, 2004).

The previous discussion reveals that this group of women consider their motherhood to be their main source of power and status, as well as their main identity-signifier, taking into account the fact that they do not have other sources of self-fulfilment, such as education or employment. This resulted in their prioritization of the value of the large family, as well as the value of their own indigenous knowledge systems, in the face of hegemonic family planning ideologies and formal, medical expertise systems. Here again, ironically, these readings, which could be considered "oppositional" to the hegemonic, dominant family planning ideology, as presented on television, are in fact, "conformist" readings which are perfectly in line with the prevailing, dominant socio-cultural reproduction norms and values in their own village community.

Negotiated Readings: Oscillating between the Poles of Tradition and Modernity

Some of the older, formally uneducated and unemployed women came up with a negotiated reading of the "small family" message. They said that it is alright to plan the family, but only if there are "good reasons" to do so. These "good reasons" were ranked in order of importance as financial or economic necessities, followed by health necessities. This attitude is best reflected in the following comment:

If the family is very poor, and they can not feed their children, of course, they should not have more children and starve them. Also, if the woman's health is very poor, then she should not have more children and harm herself. But if the couple is living in a good standard of living and enjoying good health, as we saw in this announcement, what's the problem with having more children? (Fathia, aged 43, mother of five)

In other words, it could be said that these women "granted legitimacy to the dominant ideology in the abstract, but inhabited a negotiated, or situationally defined, ideology at the level of concrete practice" (Morley, 1980, p. 165). Interestingly, their prioritization of the economic factor as the main determinant of family planning decisions appeared to be directly related to their generally low social class indicators and their limited sources of economic capital, since most of the women who made such remarks suffered from significant financial challenges. This provides another example of how the respondents' personal experiences could be "read back" into their interpretation of televised texts (Buckingham, 1996; Fiske, 1987; Livingstone, 1990). Additionally, while moving into the middle position of negotiation, these women still remained loyal to the traditional ideology of motherhood (Wearing, 1984), which prioritized the family and children's interests above everything else. This was especially clear when they highlighted the importance of family planning for the children's welfare, in terms of enabling them to live a decent life, and to satisfy their basic, daily needs. This provides further evidence of their collectivist, rather than individualistic, ideological orientation toward the discourse of motherhood.

Other women in this group acknowledged the importance of family planning, in general, but felt alienated from the concept of the small family, as presented in the televised announcement. This was not only due to the "urban otherness" of the characters in this announcement, in terms of their different lifestyle, but it was also due to their different circumstances, which were not applicable to them, such as living in a nuclear family household. Therefore, as some of these women pointed out, the young couple in the announcement were perceived as being "free from many pressures and constraints," which they were personally subjected to, especially as a result of living in extended family households. In brief, the ability to take independent decisions, like the young couple in the announcement, was considered a "luxury," which most of these women were longing for, but which they simply felt that they could not afford. Some of these women were, in fact, subjected to all forms of pressure, especially from their mothers-in-law, and some of them were motivated by jealousy in their reproductive competition with other women in the same family household. This last point is something which most women did not directly admit or talk about, but which was inferred from some of the personal narratives and episodes which some of them gave, such as the following:

I live with my mother-in-law and the rest of my husband's family in the same house. Everyone in the house was ridiculing me and making fun of me for not having sons. I started to feel that I was less than the rest of the women in the house because they had sons and I did not. I was also afraid that my husband might divorce me or marry a second wife. I ended up with nine daughters . . . but the son never came. (Magda, aged 42, mother of nine)

These women's position clearly indicates the existence of some tension between their acceptance of the concept of family planning at the abstract level, and the pressures, difficulties, and obstacles, which did not enable them to apply it at the practical level. This ambivalent position, which moved these women into the terrain of negotiation, obliges us "to recognise both the structuring role of the text and the constructive role of the viewer in negotiating meaning" (Livingstone, 1990, p. 24).

Almost all women granted legitimacy to the concept of consultation between the husband and wife in family planning matters. Many of them gave responses like: "Yes, I think it is important for the husband and wife to take decisions together regarding family planning," and "This is a matter which has to do with the future of their family and their children, so they must both agree on it." However, women differed significantly in terms of reflecting these meanings in their decision-making processes and actual experiences regarding family planning and, thus, in their readings of the televised text pertaining to this matter. Interestingly enough, none of the women appeared to fully internalize, or identify with, the dominant ideology regarding men's active participation in family planning, which encouraged men's actual usage of contraceptive methods.

In fact, women either totally opposed any form of participation on men's part in family planning matters, or they, at the very best, only accepted the principle of shared decision-making and consultation between the husband and wife in these matters. Some of them also acknowledged the possibility of receiving some support from their husbands, who could accompany them to the family planning clinic.

However, none of them, including educated women in the younger generation, endorsed the view that men could actually play an active role in planning the family through using a method of contraception. This was mainly due to the power of the underlying traditions and norms in the village community, which do not sanction such practices.

The younger, formally educated women, especially those who were formally employed and who lived in nuclear family households, had the highest level of actual consultation with their husbands regarding family planning. Most of them said that they did not encounter resistance or objection from their husbands regarding the use of contraceptive methods, and that they always planned their future together. Most of these women praised the couple in the announcement about men's participation for taking decisions together, and for agreeing to go to the family planning clinic together. They described the man in the announcement as "a modern, enlightened man, who cares for his wife and children," and they said that he "sets a good model for other men to follow."

Interestingly, most of these women also attributed this "positive behaviour on the man's part" to his formal education. Here again, this is something which the TV announcement did not mention, but which clearly reflects these women's projection of their identity positions, their personal qualities and attributes, and the important value which they assign to investing in the formal education discourse onto their reading of televised characters and mediated texts.

Some of these young women, who adopted a negotiated code in reading this televised message, said that it is possible for their husbands to accompany them to a male, rather than a female, doctor, as shown in this announcement:

My husband accompanied me several times to see a male doctor in Tanta. That's because it is not socially acceptable, of course, for a woman to go to a male doctor alone. However, if I need to go to the female doctor here in the village, he asks me to take my sister or my mother with me, because there is really no need for him to come. Therefore, I think it would have been more realistic and convincing if they showed the man accompanying his wife to see a male, rather than a female, doctor. (Nashwa, aged 23, mother of three)

Other women in this group gave similar comments and recalled similar experiences, which indicated that they granted legitimacy to the concept of consultation between the husband and wife, in general, as well as the fact that the husband could accompany his wife to see a doctor. However, they made it clear that they did not endorse the concept of men's active participation in family planning, as presented in this televised text. In other words, they did not inhabit or internalize the dominant ideology which was put forward by the producers of this text regarding the possibility of men's actual use of contraceptive methods. This is clearly reflected in the following quotation:

I think it is possible for a man to accompany his wife to see a doctor, so she could use a suitable method of contraception. It is, in fact, his responsibility to

support her regarding this important matter. However, I do not think that rural men would accept to use any contraceptive method themselves . . . this is simply unthinkable and unrealistic. (Salwa, aged 26, mother of three)

These modified codes or situationally adapted readings of the televised text (Morley, 1980) indicate that these women have actually "constructed and reconstructed, defined and redefined their own sense of realism in relation to the TV text and the characters in it, in light of the discourses which came to bear on them and to affect the formation of their identities as social subjects and as readers" (Fiske, 1987, p. 21).

Therefore, it is clear that the concept of men's active participation in family planning was largely perceived by most women as an "alien," "urban" concept, which was out of touch with their own lived experiences as rural women. This was clearly manifested in the fact that none of the women in my study, including those who came up with dominant readings of other messages, reported that their husbands have ever used contraceptive methods, or even considered using them. This could be attributed to two main factors.

The first such factor is the prevailing social norms and conservative traditions in the village community, which do not sanction such reproductive practices, as previously mentioned. The second is the women's strong feelings that anything related to childbirth is largely considered their own domain of power, interest, and authority. This last point is not simply something which is imposed on these women or defined for them. Rather, we could say that it is largely chosen by the women themselves, who appear to take special pride in their "'life-giving' qualities which men lack" (Gray, 1992, p. 240). In other words, regardless of the differences in terms of their sources of personal status, age, and personal experience, all women in my study felt that the area of childbirth and reproduction was their own sphere of interest, and their prime responsibility, which they should take charge of. This could be directly linked to the notion that most of these women wanted to retain control and power in the realm of reproduction. Therefore, they resisted the idea of men's use of contraceptives, since it would involve handing over this power to their male partners (Mies & Shiva, 1993; Inhorn, 1994).

This reminds us that the differences and diversities between these women do exist within the boundaries of their uniform and shared ethnic and cultural identity as Egyptian rural women. This "common identity" binds them together in a "singular community" (Grossberg, 1996), which largely determines their values, norms, and perceptions, especially in sensitive and delicate matters, such as reproduction and family planning, which are heavily loaded with cultural, religious, and traditional meanings. This common identity also defines these women's position(s) of existence, as Hall (1996) argues, which, in turn, distance them from "Others," through setting the limits of their identification with, or alienation from, any urban or foreign themes, ideas, or innovations.

The previously discussed negotiated readings highlight the fact that, in occupying "in-between places," and in achieving "border crossings," the "modern" does not totally abandon the "Other," i.e., tradition; rather, it tries to accommodate it (Grossberg, 1996). This confirms that identities are never fixed or unitary; rather, they are always changeable and moveable, and, therefore, they create a "meeting point," between different positions and locations (Hall, 1996, p. 5).

Interestingly enough, most women who came up with these negotiated readings oscillated in their readings between the two poles of opposition and negotiation, rather than the two poles of dominant and oppositional readings. This reminds us that "the meaning of a negotiated reading depends on one's conception of the extreme readings between which it falls. Need the negotiation be between a dominant and an oppositional reading, or can it be applied also to a compromise between . . . discourses?" (Livingstone, 1990, p. 170)

Some of the older, formally uneducated and unemployed women granted legitimacy to the concept of doctor consultation in the abstract, but they explained why it was not necessarily applicable to their own experiences and circumstances. Most of these women indicated that consulting the doctor was considered a "luxury" which was not available to them when they got married many years ago:

When I got married 25 years ago, I did not have anyone to ask about pregnancy, delivery, and family planning, except my mother, my mother-in-law, and the traditional birth attendant, the *daya* . . . there was no doctor in the village at the time . . . because she only came to the village a few years ago. (Anwar, aged 44, mother of five)

The above quotations draw our attention to the fact that these women accepted the dominant ideology regarding doctor consultation, at the abstract level, but they also highlight some generational differences, which locate them in different historical, temporal, and social spaces. These different locations, in turn, distanced the speakers from other women, as well as from total identification with the dominant ideology of doctor consultation, which was not seen as the only valid alternative. In fact, many of these women still prioritized their informal, indigenous knowledge systems in reproductive and health matters, and most of them mentioned their continued reliance on the traditional birth attendant, the *daya*, in such matters. Some of these women, for example, who discontinued using a contraceptive method without consulting the doctor, but who still had a positive experience (i.e., did not end up with an unwanted pregnancy), came up with a negotiated reading of the message regarding medical consultation. They read into the message that the woman made a mistake, but not because she did not consult the doctor before stopping the pill:

I think she should have asked someone, such as her mother, her mother-in-law, or any woman who has been married for a long time and has enough experience in such matters. She should not just stop the method like that without asking first. (Dawlat, aged 46, mother of six)

This acknowledgement of competing, indigenous knowledge systems as valid and viable alternatives, particularly in the face of the superiority of institutionalised, formal knowledge systems, could be considered another attempt on these women's parts to assert their own value and legitimacy in the face of society's hegemonic values and belief systems.

Interestingly, when some of these women gave statements which granted legitimacy to the concept of doctor consultation, they were, in many cases, trying to give stereotypical and socially acceptable answers, which could give them a more favorable image in front of younger, educated women in the focus groups. These comments, which were usually different from many of their earlier answers in individual, in-depth interviews, provide further evidence of how the process of making meaning is produced socially and interactively.

The strength of the oral culture and interpersonal channels of communication in the village community led to spreading certain rumors and misconceptions about contraceptive methods and family planning practices, which became very widespread and widely believed. In fact, some of these rumors became regarded as "facts," even by some of the formally educated women. For example, all the women in my study, including those who were formally educated and employed, said that they never used any contraceptive methods at the beginning of their marriage, because they were afraid that this could cause permanent infertility. This view is best expressed in the following quotation:

Sometimes, it is wise to listen to a sincere advice. For example, I heard from many people that using any method of contraception before having the first baby could lead to permanent infertility. Of course, I was reluctant to use any method at the beginning of my marriage for this reason . . . and I do not know any woman in the village who ever used a method when she first got married either. (Safaa', aged 20, mother of two)

The reason why this (mis)conception became so widely believed and internalized among all women in the village is that it became interwoven with the prevailing fabric of reproductive values, norms, and traditions in the village, which requires every woman to "prove her fertility" at the beginning of her marriage. This point is of particular importance in rural Egypt, where infertility is considered a serious social stigma, which could diminish the woman's status significantly, and could, in most cases, threaten her marriage (Inhorn, 1994; Warwick, 1982). As one woman explains:

Everybody puts pressure on the newly married woman to have her first baby as soon as possible. They want to make sure that she can have children . . . there are no exceptions to this rule.

Therefore, the previous discussion draws our attention to two important points. First, it provides a clear example of how forms of oral culture, such as rumor and gossip, which are firmly embedded in the prevailing norms and traditions, could be effectively used to combat and challenge the dominant ideology, which is propagated by television, and to resist the "ideal subject position," which television invites us to occupy (Fiske, 1987). This reminds us that "Non-television meanings, i.e., those that derive from the discourses of the reader rather than those of the text, are ones that are frequently promoted and circulated orally" (p.83). Second, it provides further clear evidence that the diversities and differences which are exhibited by the women in this study exist within the boundaries of an underlying, uniform ethnic, national, and cultural identity. Therefore, these differences have to be studied and analyzed against this background of shared similarities and within this framework of common identity.

Interestingly enough, some of the young women's relocation in the new "urban" sphere moved some of them into the terrain of negotiation regarding the issue of family planning. This is mainly because this new, urban sphere brought these young women in direct contact with some of the advocates of modern Islamic revivalist movements, whether at work, or in schools or universities. Many of the followers of these movements are either skeptical about the issue of birth control, or are outwardly opposed to it. Therefore, although some of these young women's relocations into the new urban sphere generally strengthened their internalization of the dominant family planning ideology, as previously mentioned, other women among this group started to develop some counter-hegemonic views pertaining to this issue as a result of this new relocation. This was clearly manifested in their questioning of the religious legitimacy of the concept of "limiting" childbirth, as advocated by the Egyptian government on TV, and in privileging the concept of "spacing" childbirth instead. This view, which is widespread among conservative religious scholars and members of Islamic fundamentalist groups (Warwick, 1982), is best expressed in the following statement by one of these young respondents:

I heard from some of my colleagues in Tanta that it is religiously forbidden, *haram*, to say, "I will not have more than two children only." They say it is alright for the mother to take some rest between pregnancies, and to space childbirth, since this can be good for both the mother and the children. However, they totally object to limiting the number of children, because it could be an interference with God's will . . . although I am not personally planning to have more children, I think they may have a point.
(Karima, aged 22, mother of two)

This last point provides clear evidence that the process of social change is never a one-directional, linear process. Rather, it is always a two-way process, which works in two parallel, often contradictory, directions, i.e., the direction of accelerating change, and the direction of restoring tradition. It is between these two equally strong forces that the women of Kafr Masoud struggled to create new identities and to negotiate old ones.

The previous discussion draws our attention to the importance of women's own lived realities and the constraints in their personal and social lives in influencing their meaning production and negotiation processes. For example, some of the women, who were generally more economically challenged than the rest of the village community, were more likely to grant legitimacy to the concept of family planning in the case of extreme economic necessity or financial hardship, even if they were not able to practice it themselves, for one reason or another. Other women in this category approved of the concept of the small family, in principle, but also felt alienated from it due to some practical constraints barring them from the adoption of contraceptive practices, such as living in an extended family household and being subjected to pressure from authoritative family figures, or not having access to the necessary medical and contraceptive services.

Most importantly, the above discussion reveals that the process of social change should not be studied as a form of "culture clash" between the binary oppositions of "tradition" and "modernity" (Gillespie, 1995). Rather, it should always be perceived as an ongoing process of "cultural negotiation"

and "cultural translation," which calls forth "a range of ambivalent responses, sometimes hardening and sometimes dissolving boundaries" (p. 208), between the two poles of tradition and modernity. This, in turn, gives birth to the equally complex and interrelated processes of identity negotiation and meaning negotiation.

Concluding Remarks

This study explored a complex matrix of interrelated factors which shaped the women of Kafr Masoud's roles and identities as wives and mothers, and, thus, influenced their differing interpretations of the televised family planning messages. It revealed how these women's sources of personal status, especially education and employment; their sphere of social relations; their family and household structure; and their personal experiences, which are all outcomes of the process of social change, affected their identity constructions and meaning productions.

It also showed how these women reflected their own values, priorities, perceptions, and even their fears and anxieties, into their differential interpretations, and how "these interpretations resonate with yet further cultural understandings, depending on the knowledge, experience, and position of the viewer." (Livingstone, 1990, p. 182)

The study also highlighted the impact of the strong oral culture in the village, which manifested itself through rumors, gossip, and the influence of informal opinion leaders, such as the religious preacher (*imam*) in the village mosque and the traditional birth attendant (*daya*), as well as the collective pattern of television viewing, which is firmly embedded in these women's oral culture, on shaping women's views and attitudes towards family planning.

These findings are perfectly in line with Warwick's (1982) observations on the urban/rural, and we can also add popular/official, divide in Egypt regarding the issue of family planning. He rightly mentions that:

While Islamic leaders in Cairo issued statements supporting contraception, imams in the villages were proclaiming its immorality. And as medical authorities in the capital certified the health benefits of child spacing for mother and child, local midwives were spreading rumors about the dire consequences of pills for users and their children. In Egypt . . . the centralist bias of planners and decision makers led to a severe discounting of opinion leaders outside the capital city. Yet it was these leaders who became influential when the programs finally reached their intended clients. (pp. 83-84)

My study not only confirms all the points in this quote regarding the urban/rural divide on the issue of family planning, the impact of local informal opinion leaders in the village, and the power of rumors in countering family planning efforts; it also reveals the strong impact of the rising wave of Islamic fundamentalism, which plays an influential role in spreading counter-hegemonic ideas against the concept of birth control, as introduced by the Egyptian government on television. This last point could be best explained in light of the significant social changes in Egypt in the 1990s. As Abu-Lughod (2005) explains,

"Particular changes were set in motion in the 1970s that unfolded especially starkly over the course of the 1990s, making Islamism and globalization . . . serious competitors for . . . developmentalism" (p. 14). This tension between the two competing tides of Islamism and globalization was certainly evident, especially in the case of some of the women in the younger generation, who became exposed to the growing tide of Islamic fundamentalism, as a result of working in the close-by city of Tanta, and, therefore, started to question the religious legitimacy of family planning. Ironically, in this particular case, however, a unique combination of the equally strong waves of both Islamism and globalization influenced these young women's shifting subjectivities and their changing views on family planning.

The study also revealed a relatively high degree of mistrust in the government's family planning messages, due to lack of credibility in the source of this information. This finding could be best explained in light of McAnany's (1980) remark that, since the rural poor are at the bottom of the social system, they, therefore, have a "built-in-bias" against information from governmental sources, unless that government has taken some clear steps in order to improve their situation. The danger that the rural poor may see in government information is that it can be "self-serving" and "political," and may simply be a device to substitute "words for actions" in helping rural people.

All the above points highlight the insensitivity of the official, governmental position, as conveyed in the televised family planning messages, to the local, authentic cultural context of reproduction in rural Egypt, with all its complexities and uniqueness. In other words, we can contend that "where there was virtually no consultation or even much attention given . . . was at the local level. It was here that the family planning program encountered its greatest obstacles to implementation" (Warwick, 1982, pp. 83-84). The findings of this study certainly confirm this observation.

Therefore, in an effort to counter this insensitivity and to move away from a "top-down" hegemonic perspective on the issue of family planning to a "bottom-up" approach that represents rural women's perspectives, I allowed the women in my study to have a "voice" and to narrate their own personal experiences and lived realities in their own words. I also explored these women's different ideologies and discourses around family planning, bearing in mind that these differences could never be thoroughly analyzed in isolation from the prevailing norms of reproduction, and the broader socio-cultural, religious contexts which determine fertility decisions, since these diversities exist within the boundaries of an underlying uniform ethnic, national, and cultural identity. Therefore, these differences have to be studied against this background of shared similarities, and within this framework of common identity. This highlights the fact that "cultural identities are comprised of both shared elements and points of difference" (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002, p. 144).

The fact that these women's different shades of identities and competing subjectivities existed within the boundaries of a shared socio-cultural context, which determines socially acceptable norms, values, and behaviours, was clearly evident in a number of ways. First, despite these women's different ideologies of motherhood, which oscillated between the poles of collectivism and individualism, none of them abandoned motherhood altogether. In fact, these women, despite their different demographic characteristics, unanimously defined themselves as "mothers," and they struggled to assert their

competence as devoted mothers. Second, some televised concepts, such as men's active participation in family planning practices through using male contraceptive methods, were unanimously denounced as an inappropriate, alien, and urban concepts, which did not fit the village's conservative norms and values.

The women in this study exhibited resistances on different levels, a process which requires an "understanding of the concept of gender itself as politically constructed" (Dow & Condit, 2005, p. 449). Interestingly, their processes of endorsement and resistance were closely interrelated and synonymous phenomena, yet they operated in opposite directions. In other words, by endorsing one ideology, these women were simultaneously resisting its opposite. On one hand, those who came up with dominant readings and endorsed the modern, hegemonic family planning ideology, which advocates small family size; promotes the social, economic, and health rewards of family planning; and prioritizes medical expertise, have simultaneously resisted traditional reproduction norms, traditional ideologies of motherhood and femininity, and traditional, indigenous knowledge systems. On the other hand, those who adopted oppositional readings and endorsed a counter-hegemonic position towards this modern family planning ideology, have simultaneously resisted modern assumptions regarding the value of the small family and its social and economic benefits, modern constructions of motherhood and femininity, and the value of medical expertise.

Here, it is important to remember that women who endorsed the dominant, hegemonic family planning ideology were, interestingly enough, opposing their society's widely held and largely acceptable socio-cultural reproduction norms and contexts, while the exact opposite was true in the case of women who opposed the hegemonic family planning perspective, since they were, in fact, conforming to the dominant modes of reproduction in their own local community. These interesting reversals and contrasts highlight the complexities surrounding these women's subjectivities and resistances.

In examining these multiple resistances, the study investigated how this complex meaning production process plays both a divisive and an integrative role reflecting these women's diversions and overlaps, as an active and interactive media audience, across the traditional/modern dichotomy (Khamis, 2004; Gillespie, 1995). It illustrated why and how these women constructed their identities and resistances differently, and how these differing constructions were, in turn, read back into their complex meaning production processes. In doing so, I endorsed the view that the relationship between television and its audiences could be best described as a series of "encounters" between television that seeks "to shape, inform, and educate and those who are the intended objects of this molding" (Abu-Lughod, 2005, p. 11). I argue that the outcomes of these encounters are largely shaped by the audiences' "situated knowledge," as well as "the experiences they have on the ground and the alternative discourses they have available to them" (Abu-Lughod, 2005, p. 14).

This theme of multifaceted resistances compels us to explore an equally complex and ambivalent process: the politics of "gender dynamics" in the village, as they revealed themselves through these women's family planning narratives. Although my study generally showed that men still enjoy a relatively advantaged position in most families in Kafr Masoud, the fact remains that most women have their own ways of exercising power and control, although in different ways and to varying degrees. In the case of women in the new generation, their increasing access to education and employment opportunities resulted

in more shared decision making and consultation with their husbands around all issues, including family planning. Their economic independence and education, as well as their husbands' education, were key factors in improving their decision-making power and asserting their status and modern identities.

However, the process of asserting power was much more subtle among women in the older generation, who had less access to education and economic independence, and, therefore, had to usually exercise power through a variety of informal and indirect ways (Macleod, 1991; Saunders & Mehenna, 1986; Abaza, 1987; Morsy, 1978). I refer to this phenomenon as deploying women's "alternative power tactics." Mona Abaza (1987) describes the process through which the rural woman, or the *fellaha*, resists patriarchal authority and domination, indirectly and informally, as a form of "traditional feminism." She argues that very little attention has been given to exploring this complex process. The alternative power tactics, which are employed by these women, include the subtle ways through which they influence their husbands' ideas and decisions, by suggesting things to them, putting words in their mouths, and finally convincing them that they are the ultimate decision makers. However, most of these women are also very careful to maintain stereotypical sex roles, through upholding their husbands' traditional images as the heads of the households and the official spokesmen of the families, even if this is not necessarily true all the time, or in all cases. This is mainly because they believe that any reversals in these stereotypical roles, or any attempt to break away from these traditional images, are considered socially unacceptable, or even shameful. This was especially more evident when these women were talking in front of other women in the focus group discussions. This insistence on preserving the husband's "traditional" image of superiority was also evident in these women's rejection of the idea of having their husbands visit the local health unit, out of fear of hurting their images and tarnishing their reputations in the traditional village community. It was also clear in their attempt to avoid any discussion, or even implication, of how they might plot against their husbands' desire to have more children through secretly using one method of contraception or another without their knowledge. Again, this is something that they were never willing to share in front of other women in the focus group discussions, but they reluctantly admitted it in private interviews, after they got to know me well, and after I promised not to tell anyone else in the village. This provides another clear example of these women's use of "alternative power tactics" as a form of exercising their agency and expressing their resistance. This leads us to conclude that, far from being a simple, direct, or straightforward phenomenon, the complexity and ambivalences of gender dynamics in the village community revealed themselves in multiple, and often contrasting, forms.

Most importantly, in eliciting these women's differential responses and interpretations of the televised family planning messages, the study did not just explore the two diametrically opposed poles of acceptance and rejection, which were exemplified in dominant and oppositional readings. Rather, it also made room for exploring the middle ground of negotiation, which reconciles some of the aspects of these two polar opposites. I argue that in oscillating between the two poles of acceptance and rejection of the dominant family planning ideology, the women of Kafr Masoud were, in fact, oscillating between the two poles of tradition and modernity, since the tides of change and conformity are always two equally strong, although contradictory, forces which are constantly shaping these women's views, practices, and subjectivities (Khamis, 2004).

In exploring these complex and overlapping phenomena, the study avoided any assumption regarding the possible "effects" of the televised family planning messages on shaping the women of Kafr Masoud's views, attitudes, or practices towards this sensitive issue. Rather, I attempted throughout this study to explore these women's "readings" and "interpretations" of the messages in the televised family planning campaign, and to highlight their own power and agency as an active, interpretative audience. This angle of analysis, I argue, is perfectly in line with the study's "feminist" orientation, which attempts to empower this largely "invisible" audience through giving them a "voice" and a chance to narrate their personal experiences with motherhood, femininity, and family planning.

Finally, I argue that this was made possible through the reliance on a qualitative, ethnographic methodological approach in this study, and through analyzing the complex process of "TV talk" (Gillespie, 1995), which infiltrated many aspects of these women's everyday lives and overlapped with their intimate discussions around "women's matters," providing an excellent forum and a naturalistic platform for investigating these women's contrasting and overlapping identities, subjectivities, and resistances. I believe it is only through the adoption of such an "audience-sensitive" intellectual approach and methodological orientation that the complexities of these women's lived realities, television experiences, and family planning views can be truly revealed, and only through those frameworks that the multiple meanings, identities, and resistances in their lives can be accurately interpreted and adequately contextualized.



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