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Empowering women in rural Egypt

In the run-up to the general election, we're hearing a lot about change. As we read manifestos, listen to debates and discuss the print media's attempts to influence us, it is easy to become cynical and disillusioned with politics. Even so, most of us in the UK are acutely aware of the importance of our right to vote, and honour those who campaigned for universal suffrage in the past.

In Egypt, women gained the right to vote in 1956, and since then there have been many positive changes for those living in the urban areas – women increasingly go into higher education, develop fulfilling careers and play a role in politics. In the rural areas of the south, however, the past five decades have seen hardly any significant change in women's situation.

In these isolated villages, poverty and illiteracy form a vicious cycle. Undereducated women are ill equipped to assert their rights and improve their standard of living. Poverty in turn deters them from seeking education or from encouraging their daughters to take a different path from the one that has prevailed for generations. Many families don't see the point of registering a girl's birth. Without a birth certificate, she technically doesn't exist.

BibleLands, in partnership with DUET (The Development of Upper Egypt Trust) runs a variety of programmes to empower women and girls in poor communities. Literacy classes enable women to apply for a birth certificate and return to education, which equips them to make choices and become aware of their legal rights.

Health awareness classes teach women of all ages about health and hygiene, nutrition and child care, encouraging them to shun dangerous traditions that include female genital mutilation (FGM). The classes are very popular and have a big impact on the standard of living. Even something as simple as installing a shelf to keep pots and pans off the dirt floor can reduce the risk of disease. DUET can also help women by offering interest-free micro-loans that enable them to start small businesses and generate their own income.

By educating individuals, BibleLands' partners in Egypt are gradually helping communities to develop and become self-sufficient. As a DUET representative told us:

'It works one household, one young girl graduating from secondary school at a time. At first glance it might not seem much, but the ripple effect of these small choices made by mother, wives and daughters is the only way to go in a society constrained by poverty and illiteracy.'

You can find out more about BibleLands and the work of our overseas partners (including **DUET**) by visiting www.biblelands.org.uk or calling 01494 897950.