

Living & Leisure

Katie Keyser

Living & Leisure Editor

living@cortlandstandard.net

Bertini: Pay attention to the girls

By KATIE KEYSER

Living and Leisure Editor

living@cortlandstandard.net

Cathy Bertini has seen how boosting poor girls and women can improve the economy.

The Homer woman, former director of the United Nations World Food Program, and the first woman to hold that post, has implemented food programs in the world's poorest areas.

The girls she's seen live in rural areas, much like Cortland County, but much poorer, and with less access to resources, she told the Zonta Club of Cortland on Tuesday.

People in power need to pay attention to the girls, she told the gathering at the Elks Club on Groton Avenue. Educating girls makes a huge difference.

When she was working at the World Food Program in rural Pakistan, U.N. officials gave one-liter cans of vegetable oil to girls who completed one month of school. Bertini was executive director of the WFP from 1992 to 2002.

Back then, vegetable oil was sometimes worth half the monthly salary of the girl's father. That gave him incentive to

send that child to school. That increased the girls participation in school 200 percent.

"If girls can read and write, they can get a job," Bertini said. If a woman farmer can count, she can count the number of rows of vegetables she's planted. If she can read, she can read the instructions on the bag of seeds she'll plant.

Women account for 45 percent of the farm workers in the world, except for those with mechanized farm economies, according to the World Food Program. Farmers who are educated are 60 percent more economically productive, Bertini said.

Bertini donated \$250,000 from a 2003 World Food Prize for a trust to educate girls.

"We have funded 30 programs in 21 countries," she said.

One grant paid for a doctor and psychologist at the American University of Nigeria to help girls kidnapped by terrorist group Boko Haram from a Chibok school in 2014. Funds from the foundation paid for the doctor and psychologist

who spoke the girls language to help them, Bertini said.

Bertini was hired to work for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2007 to 2009, expressly eyeing gender and agriculture.

Before she got the job, she was asked to talk about gender to Bill Gates.

"I don't want to hear about this stuff," Gates said. No

women's empowerment, please.

Bertini was put on the spot.

"Look, this is not an issue about equality. It's about effectiveness — how do you make poor families be more productive," she said. "There are gender differences in what the man does and what the woman does. It's different in every community. You must pay attention. You will not learn about it when you go traveling to these meetings."

When people in power travel to small villages, who presides over those meetings, she asked: the men.

"The woman will be out in the field. They are doing the work," Bertini said.

She got the job at the Gates Founda-

tion.

Afterward, on the way to Syracuse University, where she was a teacher, she listening to NPR interview Bill Gates.

"Not many people know it," Gates said. "But most farmers in Africa are women."

That made Bertini's day.

The Gates Foundation is putting \$1 billion into women's empowerment, she said. That was announced recently by Melinda Gates, who mentions Bertini in her latest book, "The Moment of Lift."

"I feel I had a little piece in that," Bertini said.

"What can we do to help women?" asked Marlana Kruman, a Homer teen and member of the school's teen service club, the Z-Club, which Zonta Club of Cortland sponsors.

"Do what the Z-Club does, find a project in the developing world and do it, for those that help girls," Bertini said. It could be a water project.

Tell Rep. Anthony Brindisi (D-Utica), who represents Cortland County, who's on the Agriculture Committee, to support women in developing countries, she said. "That's a conduit that we have here in Cortland."