

# Gender equality brings economic empowerment to all, CRS adviser says

**By Nancy Frazier O'Brien**

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VILLANOVA, Pa. (CNS) — Empowering women and girls makes good economic sense.

That's the message Carrie Miller, senior technical adviser for health and HIV with Catholic Relief Services, brought to a roomful of Villanova University students April 18.

Miller, who has worked in 10 countries since joining the overseas aid and development agency for the U.S. Catholic community in 2000, told the story of Abushu Gudeta, an Ethiopian man with 16 children — 11 of them daughters — whose Oromo traditions called for each daughter to be promised in marriage at birth, with her future husband's family paying to raise her.

If the girl did not marry at around age 13, the father would have to repay the family for the money they had spent. But if she did marry at that young age, her education would end and she would be expected to become pregnant soon after, perpetuating "a cycle of poverty, risk to her health and inequality," Miller said.

A CRS project in Ethiopia called Empowering Adolescent Girls has helped to break that cycle for some young girls in that country, she said.

The project, from 2006 to 2009, targeted 5,500 rural girls with the goal of giving them greater access to education and economic opportunity. Elements of the project included education about agricultural production, more efficient cook stoves to free up the girls from household chores, access to low-cost irrigation, financial literacy training and access to financial services so that they could save and get small loans.

It is important, however, that the project worked not only with the girls themselves but at what Miller called "multiple levels of influence" — the girls' family and male peers, their communities and at the institutional and cultural level.

CRS also has created separate "gender clubs" for both boys and girls that have turned boys from being abusive themselves to being more protective of their female peers, she said.

At the community level, local leaders have been meeting to determine among

themselves which cultural practices are harmful to women and which are not, Miller said. Violators are sanctioned by being excluded from local burial contracts, “which is a very big deal,” she added.

Citing a variety of global studies, Miller said steps toward gender equality in a country have been shown to improve economic competitiveness by enhancing productivity, improving health outcomes for the next generation and making institutions more representative.

Returning to the case of Abushu Gudeta and his daughters, Miller said that when his eldest daughter turned 13 he decided to cancel the marriage contract and repay the dowry that had been paid for her. He did the same when his second daughter turned 13, and hopes to be able to continue for all his daughters.

Gudeta’s actions have made him “a role model in his community, breaking ground in the way they have motivated other parents to make brave choices and financial sacrifices,” Miller said.

Her evening talk was part of a symposium at Villanova on “Gender and Justice: A Global Humanitarian and Development Perspective.”

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