



# Report highlights unrealised potential of girls

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THE WORLD'S poorest countries are inhibiting their own growth and worsening the food crisis through not utilising women's economic potential, according to a new report launched yesterday by **Plan Ireland**.

The report, by the non-governmental organisation for development of children, states cultural practices which undermine girls' status and lack of education, make little sense economically.

"Without education, girls are very often confined to dangerous, unskilled work – neglecting their earning potential and slowing a country's recovery from the current financial crisis," said David Dalton, executive officer of **Plan**

**Ireland**.

Additional female education accounts for nearly half of the decrease of malnutrition achieved between 1975 and 1990, while providing one extra year of education to girls boosts women's income by 10-20 per cent. Women have also been shown to invest more of their income directly into their families.

According to the International Labour Organisation, the majority of people employed in agriculture throughout South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are women.

If women farmers received the same level of education, experience and farm inputs as their male counterparts, yield would increase by 22 per cent. In the current recession, girls are increasingly being removed from schools to work.

Although some of the child-labour is apparent, "a lot of labour goes unreported because they're doing domestic chores", says Mary Carroll, **Plan Ireland's** programme officer.

Considered an economic burden to the family, girls are often married off to older men. Early marriages reduce girls' lives to servitude and restrict access to education.

Over the next decade, 100 million girls will be expected to marry under the age of 18.

Benedicto Attoh, director of the Africa Centre in Dublin and a Nigerian citizen, spoke at the report's launch. Married at the age of 15 to a man 25 years her senior, she said: "A lot of young people, especially women, are forced into mar-

riages because of lack of awareness, education and poverty.

"It is believed if girls are married early, it stops them from getting into prostitution and promiscuity, but that is not true. It is a modern form of slave trade."

Speaking of the economic circumstances that forced her father to arrange her early marriage, she said: "I was born into a poor family with 10 siblings and we were raised in two rooms. My father thought he had found a son-in-law who was rich."

Ms Attoh said that without an education, prostitution became a very attractive option for many women from poor families.