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'I was forced to marry at 15, and had to take a voodoo oath to make me faithful'



Benedicta Attoh was born into extreme poverty in Nigeria in 1970. At age 15, she became a 'child bride' when her father arranged for Benedicta to marry a man 25 years her senior. Impoverished parents in developing countries sometimes give away their young daughters in return for hefty dowries and the promise of a better life.

There is also a long-standing tribal custom in some countries in which young daughters are forced into early marriages to keep them from promiscuity, and it creates enormous risks for the young girls (see panel).
Benedicta managed to escape her forced marriage after two years, but that was not without its own immense difficulties. Today she lives in Dundalk with her second husband and two children, and works as a director of the Africa Centre, and as development and awareness officer of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Integration.

She is now working with **Plan Ireland** on a new campaign entitled 'Because I Am A Girl', which argues that the failure to educate girls is putting them at risk and is costing the world's poorest countries billions a year in lost income.

Benedicta tells her story to Declan Cashin.

I was born into a family of 11, living in a two-room house right in the Niger Delta. It was just after the Nigerian Civil War, and life was very difficult for millions of Nigerians. My parents were very poor and had little education.

My African name, Omonogho, means 'a child is more valuable than wealth'. I was baptised at 13 by an Irish priest who gave me the name 'Benedicta' and I stuck with that. I was also later confirmed by an Irish priest.

I was an exceptionally bright child, and by age 15 I was finished school. My results were very good, but university wasn't an option.

This man came along who was very wealthy. I was 15; he was 40. His first wife had left him with two children. Apparently he came to seek my hand in marriage through an uncle of mine. My father thought he had found someone who would make him rich and make all our lives better.

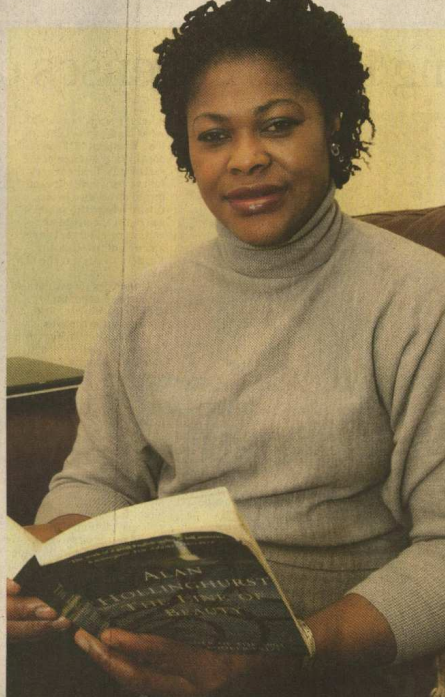
My dad threatened me and pressured me into doing it. I was a very naive 15-year-old. I obeyed my father's wishes because of my family situation, and also out of fear of what might happen if I said no to him.

Within two weeks, my dowry was paid, which was not a big amount. My father was looking more at the long term benefits for the family. Fortunately there was no church marriage because this man wasn't divorced from his first wife.

At 15, I inherited two children, then aged three and five. Soon after his first wife indicated that she wanted to return. My husband allowed her to move back in to the family home and I became the 'second wife'. We all lived in the one house.

I became pregnant, but there was a lot of violence in the relationship. Because of that, I lost my baby. Within a short space of time I got pregnant again and had my son on the day of my 17th birthday.

My ex-husband was himself a medical doctor, but he believed in voodoo, and sought 'protection' from witch doctors. Part of the voodoo oath I had to take when we got married was that I would never have anything to do with another man, and if I ever did, then I would die. The process involved me eating a live chicken heart, uncooked. It was so unreal, and I genuinely feared for my life.



Starting over: Benedicta Attoh, a former child bride at 15, now lives in Dundalk with her second husband and two children. Picture by Tom Conachy. Above, images from Plan's 'Because I'm A Girl' campaign

Even 12-year-old girls are expected to marry

- More than 100 million girls under 18, some as young as 12, are expected to marry over the next decade.
- Babies born to adolescent girls have a 50pc higher chance of dying before their first birthday than babies born to women in their 20s.
- Worldwide, young women (15-24 years) are 1.6 times as likely as young men to be HIV positive.

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was only allowed to bring the night-dress I was wearing that day.

My father wasn't mad when I returned because all the good that had been promised through the marriage never materialised. He accepted me back, but I didn't speak to him for the next three years. I felt he had mortgaged my happiness. We eventually reconciled. I realised he did it out of ignorance and greed, but also out of love. He didn't want me to suffer in life.

I still had the voodoo oath over my head. My family had to plead with my ex-husband to take the oath off of me. Eventually he agreed, but it meant having to eat another live chicken heart. It was a nightmare.

It was about eight months later when my husband said he wanted access to our son. I reluctantly agreed but it was a trick. He barred me from seeing my son. I couldn't bring him to court as it favours the men and we didn't have the money anyway.

I didn't see my son for a long time. When he was four years old, my ex-husband brought him back, saying that my son's life was no longer safe in his house, whatever that meant. I was so happy to have him back. At this stage I had finished a

course in the polytechnic and was in university studying education.

My mother and sister helped me to look after my son. At university I met a lovely new man and we eventually got married in 1992 (officiated by an Irish priest). I always knew that if I were to leave Nigeria I would come to Ireland, because I'd had such wonderful experiences with Irish missionaries.

We arrived here in 2000. I've come to know that the Irish people are very welcoming and generous, but there is a small percentage that is not well-informed. Many of my best friends today are Irish and my daughter, who was born here, has Irish godparents.

I've been working in the voluntary sector here for a long time. That's why I was invited to be part of the 'Because I Am A Girl' campaign with **Plan Ireland**. I believe my experience shows there is light at the end of the tunnel for girls and women in similar situations.

I sponsor a girl in Burkina Faso, and will do so until she is 18. I support 10 girls in Nigeria — I call them my 'dreamgirls'. I have become a liberated, independent woman because of access to education. It gave me hope and opportunities. I want to do the same for them.

Just before my son was born, my ex-husband beat me and sent me home to my parents because I had corrected his child from the first marriage for misbehaving. My son was born in my own home. A week

later, my ex-husband said I could return to the home, so I did. My mother wasn't allowed to stay with me to help me look after the baby, which is customary in Africa. I was so miserable.

I didn't know how to look after my son. I had initially been accepted to study an education course in our town, but my husband wouldn't allow it. He didn't want me competing with him

intellectually. I had nothing. I had a better vision for myself, and I told my ex-husband that I wanted better for me and my son. He got mad and ordered his driver to take my son and me back to my parents' house. I