



FOR A BETTER LIFE

Attoh takes on challenge of helping African children out of poverty **P5**



Attoh opens eyes to child poverty abroad

By Rose Foley

BENEDICTA ATTOH of Dundalk knows from personal experience the plight of young girls born into poverty.

The Nigerian native became a child bride at the age of 15 when her father arranged her marriage to a man 25 years her senior.

"I left the relationship after a year. It was a nightmare," says Attoh. "I became a single mother at 17 and had to raise my son on my own."

She did not speak to her father for two years after the experience. "I eventually made up and forgave him. He did [the forced marriage] out of ignorance and poverty."

Attoh's history makes her appointment as ambassador for Plan Ireland all the more meaningful.

"I'm excited by it because it's such a good cause," she says, emphasising the work the Dublin-based charity organisation does with girls in West Africa.

"I have first-hand knowledge and experience of what it means for a girl from a poor family not to be allowed to go to school."

Formed in 2003, Plan Ireland is part of Plan International, a development agency that started 70 years ago and now assists 1.5 million children and their families in 48 developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

Attoh's goal as ambassador is to raise awareness of Plan Ireland and to increase the number of sponsors for children in developing countries.

"I want to reach out to schools and young people and families to raise awareness



As a young girl Benedicta Attoh was forced into an arranged marriage out of family poverty

about the work of Plan Ireland," says Attoh, a mother of six children.

The Nigerian, who came to Ireland in 2000, is active in communities both here and in her homeland. Last November she launched the Dreamworld Leadership Initiative for girls in Nigeria, a programme that mirrors Plan's efforts to mentor girls and provide them the financial support to gain access to education.

"If I wasn't educated, I wouldn't be where I am today," says Attoh, who earned a busi-

ness degree in Nigeria and a Master's degree from the Dundalk Institute of Technology, and is considering continuing her education to earn a doctorate in anthropology.

Attoh also mentors and trains young women to become involved in politics in Ireland, a field she has personal experience with after running as a Fine Gael candidate in last year's local elections.

Although she did not win, she says she received a lot of support from Irish people and

the party itself, despite pockets of resistance to her minority candidacy.

But Attoh insists that the real focus needs to be on aiding children, particularly girls, and Plan Ireland's work. For the last four years she has sponsored a child through the organisation at the cost of €22 per month.

"Even though we're living in a period of recession, I believe there are thousands of Irish people who can make that contribution, to give a girl a life," she says