

Irishtown,
Dublin.

Last year, Helen volunteered in HFH's two-and-a-half week long house-building initiative in Honduras.

With two-thirds of its natives living in poverty, Honduras is one of the poorest and least developed countries in Latin America. Some 66 per cent of its houses are classed as inadequate.

"I'd done some fundraising and general charity work

in the past but building a house in Honduras was my first time contributing to a full-on volunteering project abroad and it was a real eye-opener," says Helen.

"The poverty there was extreme. Most of the kids there don't get any real education and live in shacks that lack facilities for the most part."

While she admits the programme wasn't easy, she insists that it's not supposed to be.

"Some volunteering programmes abroad set you up in the lap of luxury so you do a hard day's work during the day but return to your creature comforts in the evening. That defeats the purpose of going as you're supposed to be experiencing the poverty that you're helping to eradicate," she says.

"With HFH, you get the real experience of life in a poverty-stricken country. In Honduras, myself and the other volunteers lived in a national park right in amongst the locals and we had no comforts, besides a mosquito

net. I'm taking a break from building houses this year but hope to take it up again next year and do my bit to help eradicate poverty. I would highly recommend the programme."

While helping poverty-stricken countries is undoubtedly HFH's main aim, Lord Mayor of Dublin Emer Costello — a keen supporter of the organisation — insists that volunteering abroad will ultimately help Ireland and Irish women too.

"Every Irish person who travels abroad to volunteer acts as an ambassador of Ireland," says Emer.

"By participating in global activities, this helps cement Ireland as a key player in the global economy which can only help our image during the recession."

As only the seventh female out of 340 to hold her particular position of power over the years, Emer is also acutely aware of the key role women can play in making a difference in the world.

"I'm one of a select few women in a position of power even today. It's a fight to get positions which allow you to make a difference. That's why I think it's so important that women take up the opportunity to make a difference whenever they can."

Closing date for applications is 30 June. For more info, see www.habitatireland.ie



GIRL POWER: This is the first time HFH has run a Women's Build; **BELOW** The launch of the project



SWAP YOUR HEELS FOR A HAMMER!

Do your bit for those less well off by building a house

By Eva Hogan

THINK there's no room for girl power in a poverty-stricken country? Think again.

A not-for-profit organisation aiming to eliminate poverty housing, **Habitat for Humanity** (HFH) has just launched its first Women Supporting Women programme.

A ten day event taking place from October 2 to 10, Women's Build in Romania is urging female volunteers to swap their heels for hammers and join the volunteering group in the east European country.

"This year, there's a real girl power feel to the programme as it's the first year we're doing a women-only building programme," says Rachael Sands, HFH Ireland's International Programme Co-ordinator.

"Poverty often affects young girls most severely and the idea is that by building one house, we can help one girl escape from poverty. The volunteers will have the opportunity to meet with women's organisations in Romania and will be joined on site by local women who will benefit from the homes."

At present, there are over 2.4 million Romanians living in poverty, with some 150,000 substandard houses throughout the country. Many of them lack running water, adequate heating or the walls are simply falling down around them.

"Women want to help people who are disadvantaged but their desire to help also stems from the desire for a challenge and building a house from scratch certainly provides that."

But you don't need to be a handy woman with a hammer to offer your services.

All volunteers, experienced or otherwise, are fully trained before they take to their tools.

"I've had over 100 calls from women who are interested in volunteering but are worried that they're not right for the job," says Rachael. "You don't need to be an experienced volunteer and you certainly don't have to be a skilled builder. All volunteers are

trained by fully-qualified builders before they start working so we welcome all women from all walks of life to come and get involved."

In fact, the only requirements for volunteers are energy and enthusiasm.

"If you're not into it, you won't be able for it. While it's a tough programme, it can be highly rewarding for enthusiastic volunteers."

The programme, which is accepting volunteer applications until June 30, costs €1,900, this covers flights, accommodation, food, transport and cultural experiences.

"We help our volunteers with raising the funds and there are a lot of ways of doing this. Popular fundraising ideas include organising table quizzes, packing bags in supermarkets and arranging coffee mornings. Our volunteers always reach their target because we're there to support them."

While this is the first year of its Women's Build, **Habitat For Humanity**

have built over 350,000 houses across the globe, housing over 1.75 million people since its inception in the USA in 1976.

One person who has helped the organisation on its mission is Helen Sheerin (31) from