

REMARKS BY
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Good afternoon, all protocols observed.

Firstly, I would like to thank the Ministry of Labour for recognising the need to include Persons with Disabilities or PWDs in this national conversation on the Future of Work in Trinidad and Tobago. I have been asked to speak on the issue of the rights of persons with disabilities and would like to point out that this is the acceptable terminology to use rather than ‘the disabled’.

At National Centre for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) we have been training PWDs for over fifty years and offer placement services as well as employment to a number of PWDs. Unfortunately, in Trinidad and Tobago we do not have the statistics to show how much of the working population is comprised of PWDs. However, we **must** bear in mind that PWDs do **in fact** form part of the workforce, be it as part of the traditional office setting or as telecommuters; as entrepreneurs or as employees. Today therefore, let us not consider PWDs in isolation from the workforce environment. Let us remember that

inclusion is a way of thinking, and culturally, we must change our mentality to see PWDs as part of our society.

Many times when we think about PWDs, we think about persons who were born with disabilities but this is not always the case. In Britain, only 17% of PWDs are born with disabilities and 70% are working during the onset of an illness or impairment.¹ When employees acquire a disability during their working life, they should not be viewed as a resource to be ‘written off’. PWDs are people with skills and can make a valuable contribution to the economy and our society. Let us not lose sight of the human aspect.

Let us also understand that PWDs are a sector that has been continually excluded and marginalised and although we do not have the data, we know a significant job gap exists with respect to the employment of PWDs.

During our discussions today it is very important for us to consider the range of disability that exists. Types of disability

¹ Regan and Stanley, 2016, *Work for Disabled People- The Achilles' heel of Labour's welfare-to-work agenda*

include Physical, Sensory, Mental, Intellectual or developmental, and Learning. Persons with hidden disabilities such as intellectual or developmental, learning and/or mental illnesses have an even harder time than those persons with physical disabilities since their disability cannot be easily identified at a glance.

In today's discussion of possible policies to facilitate the ease of employment of PWDs in Trinidad and Tobago and about an inclusive workplace I would like you to consider, but not to limit yourself to these three important areas:

1. Education – including pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary, tech voc, re-skilling, etc.
2. Reasonable accommodation – this means necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed², such as assistive technologies including the JAWS programme, accessible bathrooms, etc.
3. Accessibility - this includes things like ramps, elevator access, etc.

² The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability

Accessibility is twofold in that although our conversation today includes PWDs in the workforce, we must remember that some of our customers are PWDs. Accessibility therefore can also benefit business activity when customers can now access your buildings and access your goods and services.

Some of you may think, this is all good information, but what does this have to do with the issue of the rights of PWDs? These are Human Rights and the right of PWDs as espoused in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which Trinidad and Tobago ratified in June 2015 as contained in:

- Article 27, on Work and Employment,
- Article 24, on Education,
- Article 9 on Accessibility
- and Articles 5, 13, 14, 24, and 27 of the Convention which speaks to reasonable accommodation.

These Articles emphasize the right of PWDs to be able to decide whether they want to support themselves through self-employment or enter into the labour market. The Convention

places this responsibility on the State Party to ensure that companies are just and non-discriminatory in their hiring practises and with remuneration packages. It is the inalienable right of PWDs to receive equal compensation for equal work and equal opportunities for advancement in the workplace.

Additionally, I would like you to recall that this is not a new conversation to some of us since prior to the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities:

- Trinidad and Tobago ratified the ILO's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention No 159 on June 3rd 1999. However, to date nothing has been done.
- In 2005, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago approved a National Policy on Persons with Disabilities. This policy is to be reviewed by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to bring it in line with the UN Convention.

The future of work, away from the typical 8am – 4 pm brick and mortar offices towards flexitime, telecommuting, virtual offices

and virtual teams may be an excellent opportunity for the inclusion of PWDs in the workplace.

I trust that this short presentation has caused the wheels and cogs in your minds to turn with ideas and that we will have a stimulating discussion in this session.

I thank you.