

**PANEL DISCUSSION ON THE THEME
“PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS”
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STATEMENT BY MARLEE MATLIN

Good afternoon, Mr. Director-General, Zohreh (*moderator*), ladies and gentlemen of the panel, and dear guests.

My name is Marlee Matlin. Some of you may know me. Some of you may not.

So, who am I? As Zohreh just said, I'm an entertainer, an author, a producer, a mother of four and a wife. And I'm an actor.

Some of you may be wondering why I'm here. I'm not here as a government official; nor as a representative of workers or employers. I'm here as a woman with a disability. I am Deaf.

To some degree, you can say that I'm here to advocate on behalf of women and men with disabilities, out of concern for how they and their families are affected by the current crisis. And, more importantly, I'm here to ask that the response to this crisis include people with disabilities.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have never let my disability stop me from doing what I love to do. As you may imagine, my work involves a great deal of communication with people. I always make sure that I have an interpreter with me who facilitates that communication.

From a young age, I was told never to let anyone inhibit my dreams or let my disability dictate who I am or what I want. I come from a family that showed me to look at life in a positive way. They encouraged and supported my dreams and they treated me as any child should be treated: with love and respect. I was also fortunate in that I found people who were great mentors along the way.

When I was 11, I remember thinking to myself when I grew up and I became an adult, I would write a book telling the world that it was okay to be deaf and that nothing would stop me from being what I wanted to be. I didn't think of what kind of stories I would be telling....I just knew that I wanted to be able to communicate with the world.

Since then, I've written three children's books, the first called "Deaf Child Crossing" about the ups and downs of a young girl growing up in the suburbs of Chicago as a means to inspire ALL children that differences in each one of us are meant to be embraced and celebrated rather than shunned and ignored.

But, my main reason for being here with you today to share with you how important it is for children and adults with disabilities to have dreams.

Like me, there are many disabled women and men in the world who have not let others limit their dreams and hopes.

Take, for example, David Luyombo of Uganda, whose story is told in a recent ILO publication. David had polio at the age of three. With the encouragement of his mother, he went to school and got a diploma in bookkeeping. Yet, it was his teachers who had made this vocational choice for him by assuming he would only be able to do work that involved sitting down.

But David had other ideas. He went on to become a veterinarian and later followed his lifelong dream of starting a business to work for the development of disabled people in his home rural area. As a qualified vet, David now trains families and disabled people in how to better care for their animals.

There is also the story of Ayelu Bedasa of Ethiopia, who runs her own successful weaving business – *a job traditionally considered to be men's work*. She became disabled as a result of a fall in her early childhood. Following a series of chance encounters with community-based rehabilitation workers employed by a Non-governmental organization (NGO), she received vocational training that enabled her to start her own business.

In talking with the ILO I know that there are many, like David and Ayelu, millions of men, women and children who may be disabled, Deaf, blind or developmentally disabled who have dreams but are left out or who don't have role models or supportive families. Often times they don't even get the opportunity to simply TRY.

I can't stress how important it is for all of us, disabled women in particular, to have powerful mentors who can rise up and inspire others, at all levels of economic activity, from the private sector to rural areas.

So, what about now? What is their situation and how are disabled people being affected by the crisis?

Already, before the crisis we knew that...

Disabled people represent about 10 per cent of the global population and an estimated 20 per cent of the world's poor. But, it is not just in developing countries that disabled people face poverty. In the US, a recent study shows that about half of all working-age adults who experience income poverty for at least 12 months have a disability. In fact, in the US, people with disabilities account for a larger share of persons experiencing income poverty than all minority ethnic and racial groups combined.

Disabled women are more likely to be poor than disabled men and non-disabled women. Their poverty is linked in part to the fact that they have limited opportunities for education and skills development.

And, ninety-eight (98%) per cent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school.

Because of stigma and discrimination, in many societies disabled children and adults are forced to live isolated and excluded from their communities.

Yet, we all know from experience that when people with disabilities find jobs that match their skills, interests and abilities, they have the potential to contribute to their communities, societies and economies.

And while there are very few reliable, global data about persons with disabilities in the crisis, recent news headlines help shed some perspective.

We read headlines telling us of reduced employment of disabled workers, less public expenditure on programmes relevant to their employability and employment, and reduced demand for products of enterprises employing disabled persons.

So, what needs to be done to ensure that people with disabilities are counted in the actions and responses to address the current crisis?

As the ILO video highlighted, people with disabilities need to be ‘counted in’ labour market policies and laws that recognize their rights.

Disabled persons must also be ‘counted in’ programmes and services, including vocational and training, that help equip and prepare them for the economic upturn.

And finally, there is a need to collect more reliable, comprehensive data about people with disabilities and their participation in training and employment.

There is still much more to be done in both developed and developing countries to ensure that disabled people are counted in as part of society.

Working together, we can help to transform the lives of hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of people all around the world in these difficult economic times.

What are the consequences of not taking action? For starters, it will be impossible to meet the pledges made by the world community to lift people out of poverty by 2015. The lack of specific attention to vulnerable groups, like disabled people, pushes them deeper into poverty and the margins of society.

From an economics perspective, the cost of excluding disabled persons from the workplace deprives societies of an estimated US\$ 2 trillion in annual losses.

So, given that I've been talking about what everyone else might do to include people with disabilities, you may ask what can I, as Marlee Matlin, do to break down the barriers?

It's important for us in the media to break down the barriers and challenge mistaken assumptions about persons with disabilities so people like David and Ayelu are included in all spheres of life and have an equal opportunity to contribute to their communities and societies. I know the importance of communication, of sharing ideas with those traditionally not brought into the mainstream. I, for one, would not be here as a mother of 4, as an Academy Award winning actress, author and advocate for children and disability related causes had I been not been given a full and accessible education and work environment.

That is because I have always ascribed to the idea stated by the first Deaf president of Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts college for the Deaf in the world when he said "The only thing Deaf people can't do is hear." That leaves a world of possibilities of things for me to do. I believe with all my heart that the real "handicaps" we face, do not lie in the ears, eyes, arms and legs of those who are differently abled – they lie in the minds of those who handicap us.

In the end, though some may think I live in a world of silence, silence is the last thing the world will ever hear from me. Therefore, I speak. I travelled here to be with all of you today at this event because I believe that in the current economic climate, we cannot afford to let the most vulnerable members of society remain an afterthought. They must be included in actions and solutions that prioritize the rights of the most marginalized and poorest people. I believe this gathering will help make this aim possible.

I am humbled in your welcoming me here and thank you for the opportunity to share in this time together with you.

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