

# Cherie Blair urges job support for disabled

By Noimat Olayiwola

Leading human rights lawyer and wife of former British prime minister Tony Blair, Cherie Blair, yesterday observed that job is not only important to give disabled people economic independence, it is also instrumental in breaking stereotypes and reducing social and physical barriers, which tend to exclude disabled people from the society.

She was speaking during a presentation titled 'Time to get equal – supporting disabled people to access their rights to employment' at the fourth International Annual Forum of Shafallah Centre for Children with Disabilities.

"For many disabled people, the opportunity to contribute and have that contribution recognised is fundamental to overcoming the stereotype of disabled people as passive dependent who have little to offer wider society," she said.

Citing article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that recognises that the right to work and earn fair wage is fundamental to every human being's ability to live fulfilling, dignified lives and to support themselves and their families, Blair said that despite many positive benefits a job offers, it is not always easy for every disabled person to find employment.

"Despite tough laws in the UK, discrimination against the disabled in the workplace is still rife as every year 5,000 disability discrimination cases are brought to employment tribunal and hundreds of thousands of disabled people experience unequal treatment at work or in the recruitment process, while many more cases go unchallenged or unreported," she mentioned.

Blair, who is also the patron of Scope – an organisation focusing cerebral palsy, said for the disabled, work is a highly effective way of changing attitudes and dispelling myths about their abilities.

"For many disabled people, job might be the only place where they have regular contact with an able person, so working alongside disabled people can help to tackle stereotypes and promote greater awareness and understanding of disabled people's needs, both at work and in wider society," she noted.

She stressed that making adjustments for disabled people in the workplace can have a knock-on benefits for other groups of people, which she said can also help to promote greater social inclusion and equality.

"Parents and those with caring responsibilities have benefits from flexible working policies, which were designed with disabled people in mind," she said, adding that providing level access and removing trip hazards in the workplace helped to make the environment safer.

"In the UK, individuals like politician David Blunkett, who is blind and founder of 'The Body Shop Dame Anita Roddick' and who died after living with hepatitis C for 30 years as well as physicist Stephen Hawking, have all demonstrated that doing something differently does not mean doing it less well," she recalled.

Speaking also during the presentation was the BT Group's director of People and Policy, Caroline Waters, who highlighted the role being played by BT in enabling disabled people by employing them.

"BT and Scope launched a 'No Voice No Choice' campaign to support people with disabilities and help them overcome barriers by providing them with the means of communicating as well as employing them into our workforce," she said.

Waters noted that overlooking people with disabilities for employment equalled to overlooking 20% of the potential workforce.

"A diverse workforce makes for a better business as employment of the disabled is not expensive and not disruptive," she stressed.

Steve Cairns, Scope's director of information, advice and employment services, who presented information about the organisations to the gathering, also shared similar sentiments saying almost half of the employable disabled people are actually not getting jobs.

"Forty-five percent of employers say they are not employing disabled people because they can't afford to employ them and those who are employed are always earning one euro less than able persons hired for similar job," he said.

GULF TIMES

