

## Transcript: Episode 4 with Ruth Owen – CEO of Leonard Cheshire

00:00 – Ruth Owen

If there's anything positive from the pandemic, I think the fact that we will work virtually for nearly two years is an opportunity for the disabled community. And it's an opportunity for employers to say, actually, it doesn't matter. You don't have to be in the office every day. We've all found that to be hugely important to how we have better work life balance. And I think for people with disabilities, it's always been, you know, the infrastructure, getting to work, getting on public transport. Now, you can work from home virtually. So, I think it's a great opportunity for the future. And I think, in the world of shortage of talent, I think young women with disabilities, I think women going into STEM are really, really important.

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I'm Tiffany Sprague and welcome to the UNDP Europe and Central Asia's Regional STEM4ALL podcast, in which we engage in conversations with people working to advance girls and women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics careers, sharing their ideas for transformative solutions within the STEM ecosystem for lasting change. STEM related fields make up the top 30 jobs expected to grow the fastest by 2026. This increase in job opportunities, coupled with the evolution of technology is creating higher demands for diversity in the labor market. Students will require innovative training and support starting at a young age to pursue STEM careers successfully. However, women and girls with disabilities face unique barriers along the STEM education pipeline, including stigma, underestimation of their skills in education systems and labor markets that are not inclusive. What are the interventions needed to ensure that girls and women are not left behind in this digitalization of the labor markets? In today's episode, we will talk with Ruth Owen, CEO of Leonard Cheshire, a global nonprofit organization based in the UK for over 70 years Leonard Cheshire has been supporting people with disabilities and breaking down barriers that deny their basic rights. Ruth is a passionate advocate of rights for people with disabilities that are acknowledged for her delivery of innovation in the disability sector. She was awarded an OBE in 2012 in recognition of her services to children with disability and young people. In 2018. She was appointed as a non-executive director of Motability Operations Group, and in 2019, selected as a member of the mayor of London's equality, diversity and inclusion advisory group. Ruth is also former chair of the Greater London regional stakeholder network appointed by the Office for disability issues. She's also had a successful career in the private sector in technology.

Just a note to say that the use of the term “disabled people” in this podcast is widely used in the UK and elsewhere, because it's seen as more closely reflecting the social model of disability, which has underpinned a lot of disability rights activism. The social model states that it's not a condition or impairment in itself, which is disabling but the barriers which can be physical attitude, which leads to denial of rights and inequality. So, the chosen terminology of disability movements around the world varies between cultures and languages.

I'm joined today by Ruth Owen. Welcome, Ruth. And thank you for joining me today.

03:16 – Ruth Owen

Thank you, Tiffany, I'm really looking forward to it.

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I would love for you to start off by sharing your background and the path that led you to Leonard Cheshire, what inspired you to go into this direction?

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Well, I guess really what inspired me was my mother. My mother was very big in the world of giving and giving back to society. She was a nurse and the oldest of five. And she always supported either individuals or organizations in giving back. So, I guess I was always going to end up in the charity sector, I probably just didn't know when I was a young woman, and she had a great influence on my life. And you know, many of you won't know that I'm actually a full-time wheelchair user. And I credit her for making me the independent woman I am today because I was ill as a young person with polio. So my role at Leonard Cheshire is the CEO and I've been on board since February of this year. And previous to that I was the CEO of Whizz Kids another disabled children's charity. And at Leonard Cheshire what's exciting about the role that I do is that actually our mission is to make disabled people independent and have choice. And we do that in a number of ways. We do that by supporting disabled people through independent living, supportive living, and with some disabled people nursing care, but also internationally we support women with disabilities who are inclusive education or employment programs as we do that in the UK as well. So I think it's kind of for me a dream job and I guess linking it back to my mother my mother was a nurse in one of Leonard Cheshire settings way back when and so Leonard Cheshire has always been very close to my heart. So, when the opportunity arose to lead Leonard Cheshire into its next chapter, I was super excited because I felt that actually what I want to see is Leonard Cheshire led by disabled people.

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Women have less access to educational opportunities due to social and gender norms. And now we're learning that the pandemic has only accelerated the digitalization of our economy and the labor market. In fact, 90% of jobs will require STEM skills and digital literacy. In your view, how do you think this work transformation is going to impact girls and women with disabilities? And how is Leonard Cheshire responding so that girls and women aren't left further behind?

05:40

What we've seen through the pandemic is that disabled people have been left behind. And I think there's a leveling up that needs to be done. But if I talk about just young girls and disability and a little bit of my own journey, why I went into tech as a young woman? And back then everybody thought, Why would I go into tech? Why would I even consider that as a career. But I felt that that was an industry that was progressive. At the time, I thought a woman like me with a disability, they'd be more accepting of me than maybe more traditional industry sectors. And I found that to be the case, though, don't get me wrong, I had to work hard. And I was one of very few women in the organization, particularly in sales, and I was the only person with a visible disability, I think what's really important is people with disabilities, particularly women look at, you know, the STEM industry, as a sector has been something

that's really, really exciting. And something that can really push their career forward and give them opportunities that maybe haven't given them in the past, I think the pandemic has been interesting, as a person with a disability, I sit virtually online all day, nobody would know, I was in a wheelchair. So I'm hoping coming out of the pandemic, that actually, people with disabilities have even greater opportunity in the digital world, have greater opportunity to have a career. And I think what's exciting to me and I mentor a number of young women, I'm excited by the fact that some of them were just fancy, some of them, you know, visible disability, actually, they're, they're going to have even more career opportunities. So I think it's important for young women to look at how they can get into STEM in a way that maybe they happen in the past. And I think that those opportunities are going to be the more, you know, more available. Because if you think about the talent that we all need, you know, we have to look in different in different areas to get to attract that talent, don't we?

07:35

Are there any programs that you're doing currently, that's addressing the needs of people with disabilities? As we go further into this digital transformation?

07:49

Yes, we do. I mean, we have a number of programs, our Can Do program where we support internships for disabled students to actually work within corporates and organizations. I think it's an exciting program. But more importantly, internationally, we work on our inclusive education because it starts with education, and young women. And I think that, for me is fundamental. I think every person with a disability can have a mainstream education, inclusive education, that opens a window. I know from my own personal experience, I never thought I would be in tech never, never thought it. But actually, when I got there, it was the best thing I did. For me in my career, Tech was becoming an everyday thing. And I think for the next generation of disabled people, digital is just it's natural, isn't it is part of their everyday life. I think everybody needs to be thinking about accessibility inclusive workforce and inclusive products and programs and services. Because I think, you know, the disabled population has, you know, money to spend like anybody else. And I think what's really a challenge right now is that, you know, to find anything on accessibility on some websites, you have to dig deep, you have to look at it right at the bottom, and sometimes you don't even see it. Why wouldn't we create a world that's inclusive and communities that inclusive at the outset? So it's not something that's tagged on at the end? or thought about afterwards? You kind of think, well, why would that be? Because I think what's so important, I think, is that, you know, disabled people want to lead the life that they want to lead. And the fact that they go on a website, and they can't find out whether a building is accessible or the toilet is accessible, I mean, I think companies and organizations are missing out. I think they're missing out on attracting disabled people with money to spend. So I think for me, it's a no brainer, and I don't understand in the workforce, why people wouldn't think about an inclusive workforce for all which would include people with disabilities. If there's anything positive from the pandemic. I think the fact that we will work virtually for nearly two years is an opportunity for the disabled community. And it's an opportunity for employers to say, actually, it doesn't matter. You don't have to be in the office every day, we've all found that to be hugely important to how we have better work life balance. And I think for people with disabilities, it's always been, you know, the infrastructure, getting to work, getting on public transport. Now, you can work from home virtually. So I think it's a great opportunity for the future. And I think, in the world of shortage of talent, I think young women with disabilities, I think women going into

STEM are really, really important. We're absolutely out to promote, and we look to scale our employment programs even larger than we do today to support people with disabilities.

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That's a great segue to my next question, what do partnerships look like to really make transformative change? I know Leonard Cheshire is an international NGO, you must partner with different stakeholders, can you tell us a little bit about who you work with?

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I think what's really important is our programs need to influence the ecosystem, they need to drive our advocacy agenda internationally. And we need to be a generous partner. So we partner with many organizations on the ground. And we also look to use our programs to drive change and influence through governments and businesses in the local countries that we work and I think actually support eight disabled people in their communities on the ground as well, because it's, you know, it's, it's a multi layered approach, it can't be one size fits all. So I think our programs are important to demonstrate this is what good looks like with our other partners on the ground. But then more importantly, for us to say to governments in country and businesses, look, this is the great success you can have. And these are the things that need to change. And this is how it needs to change for the future for people with disabilities in those countries. So, I think we always see our programs as driving our advocacy agenda, if I'm honest, and vice versa. So and it's about being a generous partner, some things we do well, and, and other things, we'd say, You know what, that's not, that's not for us. But actually, this partner is brilliant at this, and we should work with them. So, we have varying partners, we look to always make sure that we leave a legacy. That's important, and we leave greater change. But I think, for me, it's more about getting greatest cycle change. And then alongside of that we work with yourselves and with the World Bank to actually get policy change for the for the greater good for the future.

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What do you think, is the biggest challenge to getting your work done? If you could tell governments to implement one policy and as a really, our question, but what's the big priority in policy right now?

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I guess it depends where you sit in the world, if I'm honest. But I think the biggest thing is about, you know, disabled people having a life that they want to have. So like you, you and I, you know, we go to work, we support our families, we do all of those things. For many disabled people, that is not an option. And I think really most disabled people, all they want is to have the life and choice and independence. So I guess, from a policy point of view, I think it's always thinking about accessibility and inclusivity at the outset. So, designing things for independence, I think is really important. And I think, you know, it's no point, designing stuff. At the end, it needs to be thought at the beginning. So for me my biggest policy ask whether it's new products, whether it's new building, whether it's new employment scheme, whatever it is, is designing it at the outset for independence for people with disabilities to be able to contribute, and be part of and just be in society and their communities like anybody else. And I think for women, it's about giving women the opportunity to have the career they want to have, for many parts of the world women are, you know, seem to be saying and I know from my own experience, you know, it was not expected of me to go to work. I had many people in my journey,

say to me, Well, you won't work, you won't need an independent life, you won't have a home, you're going to stay at home with your parents. And I said why? They said, Well, you got a disability. I said that were so ridiculous. I don't plan to stay home with my parents any longer than anybody else. I plan to have my own life and lead my own life and meet my own mistakes and, and enjoy life. And I think I think that's today that's still for many young women that is still expected them stay at home and live within their communities if they have a disability. And I think that's the bit that we need to change as a woman with disabilities who pursued a career in tech.

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What would you say was one of the biggest challenges for you as a woman in tech? Can you cite any challenges in your life because of your disability? Or because you were a woman? And how did you overcome that?

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I had many people that believed in me and saw my talents. There were men that saw my talents, and, and bosses that kind of allowed me to be myself. And actually, if I worked really hard, I could achieve, like my colleagues, my non-disabled colleagues, I guess, probably what I didn't, because I didn't really want to see if I'm honest with you. Typically, I kind of, even though I did face a level of some discrimination, by people just saying, you know, why would you want to do that? I mean, I'm not sure that's, that that's for you. But I was lucky in the fact that I worked for an American company, they were a global tech company from the West Coast. And, and I think they were more progressive, and the fact that they saw talent, they wanted talent in different shapes and sizes. So, I was lucky in the fact that I went and worked in that organization, I did face individual difficulties, but I, I took it upon myself to educate them as much as anything, I thought, well, you know, I need to educate them about because maybe they hadn't seen anybody with a disability, whether in their family circumstances or their community. So I felt it was on me to educate them about what I could do what I could achieve. And, and if I did face any difficulties, how I would need their help, you know, not easy in a very competitive environment in industry. And there was many times that I just had to make it on my own. And that was just the way it was. And so I had to show a level of resilience. And I think a lot of people with disabilities do have those kind of skills, you know, resilience, you know, you think about getting around, you have to be pretty organized you, you have to have good project management skills, just to manage your life in, in a world that's not overly accessible. And I think the world makes you disabled, it's not the other way around, because the world is not easy to navigate, and, you know, buildings and transportation and the infrastructure. So I guess from in my tech career, I, I was determined, I thought, I'm not going to let other people put me off. And if I don't make it, then I don't make it. But I was pretty determined that I thought that if I had a good brain, I could work the same as anybody else. I just worked differently in the fact I worked from a wheelchair. The last thing I would say on that is that people often said to me in the organization, well, you know, what will clients think? Because I did a front, you know, client facing role. And I said, Well, what do you mean, what will they think? And they said, Well, you know, the fact that you're a wheelchair user, and you've got a disability, and I said, well, they need to be much more worried about what comes out of my mouth than being rocking up in a wheelchair, I said that they need to be much more concerned about that. So I said, Well, if I worked hard, and I contributed, and I demonstrated that I had skills and talents. If I could do the job, then I thought that they would see beyond my wheelchair. And fortunately, in most cases they did. I think every little step counts. It's not

going to happen overnight. And we're seeing through the pandemic. People have been homeschooled, you know, we've seen to the pandemic, people have worked at home for two years. And you know, like I said to you earlier, people wouldn't even know I'm sat in a wheelchair. I think what it needs it needs, low cost technology in the developing countries is access for all. I think, in the education system, I think it's really, really wanting that change and advocating for that change for people with disabilities and saying, Yes, I will have those pupils in my class. Yes, I will do this. And then we're going to do it differently. And we're going to be inclusive, across the board and embracing difference. I mean, differences, good. Differences important. I think technology plays a huge role in the future of access, and inclusive education for girls.

19:15

Well, before we go, can you please share how our listeners can maybe get involved with Leonard Cheshire's work or volunteer? Opportunities, advocacy? And such?

19:26

Yes, absolutely. I mean, you know, we were so lucky with our volunteers. We could not run our organization without our volunteers. We're always looking for people to be ambassadors of our work and be involved in our work and advocating for greater societal change. And I think nothing pleases me more typically than having young disabled people come to us and say, Look, we want to work with you because I see the use as the future. You know, we at Leonard Cheshire are going to go through a period of change and transformation, to really look to the future. to look to the future of, you know, what does work look like for the future for disabled people? But more importantly, what does Leonard Cheshire look like for the future for disabled people, for the next generation. So, they can either contact me personally on my email, which is [Ruth.Owen@Leonardcheshire.org](mailto:Ruth.Owen@Leonardcheshire.org). Or they could go to our website. Either way would be fine with me, but I would, you know, I'd be thrilled because I, I want to hear from the next generation and I want to hear from young women and the challenges they're facing and seeing how I can help and support in the work we do at Leonard Cheshire, but also how I can help young women to really reach their ambitions and their career aspirations.

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While you're certainly a role model for everyone, I am just always amazed by your story and really appreciative of your time.

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Absolute pleasure. I'm a massive supporter of young women reaching their potential and I, you know, like I said earlier, it was expected of me that I would do nothing because I was a girl with a disability. It was expected that I would stay at home with my parents and I was absolutely determined that was not going to be the life for me. So, anything I could do to support young women, anything personally I could do to help young women I'm happy to, I'm happy to do. Thank you very much for inviting me to thoroughly enjoyed our conversation.

21:30

I'm Tiffany Sprague, thank you for listening to our STEM4ALL podcast. If you liked what you heard, and would like to learn more about the key gender barriers holding girls and women back from advancing in STEM, please visit our website STEM4ALL (with the number four) [stem4all.eurasia.undp.org](http://stem4all.eurasia.undp.org).