



Credits: Chris Yate Medina

# Disability Visibility AT LONDON FASHION WEEK

With the fashion industry and its participants scrambling to combat decades of non-inclusivity, why are we still not seeing disabled models on the runway? **Disability Review Magazine** sends writer *Priya Raj* to investigate fashion's biggest event.



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**N**on-inclusivity in the fashion industry is a tale as old as time. The runway was once reserved for models over a certain height and under a certain weight, but as audiences' perceptions have changed, brands and casting agents have adapted their models and faces to reflect this new wave. This was enough until the pandemic highlighted the thriving exclusionary nature of the fashion industry, shedding light on the experiences of people of colour and other marginalised communities, including those with disabilities. The MBS group reported that around 15% of the global population have

a disability [around one billion people]; however, this group is, more often than not, invisible at fashion week. While brands like Burberry and Tommy Hilfiger have made clear, conscious efforts to include disabled models in their campaigns, it still just isn't enough. Last season [September 2022] saw New York Fashion Week collaborating with design fellows at Open Style Lab (OSL) to present the Double Take show. London Fashion Week, being the first 'business-as-usual' fashion week since the pandemic, despite the recent death of Britain's longest serving monarch, brought potentially the most diverse casting we've yet seen. Non-adaptive brands were making a conscious effort to cast and include disabled bodies and usual "inclusivity" markers like colour and body-proportion diversity. Brands with disabled models included Sinead O'Dwyer, Sarah Regensburger and Ray Chu. ▶

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ever show on the official London Fashion Week schedule. Her designs are made for people with mobility difficulties and disabilities, adapted to make the garments easier and more comfortable to wear. Victoria's showcase is truly one of a kind, with the majority of her models having a visible disability. Her [Kurt Geiger sponsored] show this season took meticulous planning, with many special considerations needed to accommodate disabled models and attendees. Victoria explained that she "does not approve venues where wheelchair users must use a separate or back entrance. There is a quiet room for the models, private changing areas, and a BSL interpreter will be alongside the musicians performing. It's common knowledge that disabled models are rarely booked for fashion week, non-disabled designers are not doing enough, and [I fear] are unlikely to unless they are forced". Rebecca Farrar-Hockley, Kurt Geiger CCO, said "people with disabilities are too often excluded from the fashion sphere, and it's essential that we all join forces to help change this". ■

The latter is a Taiwanese brand, focused on gender fluidity in garments. Ray, when questioned about the decision to cast disabled models in his SS '23 presentation said "Everyone can wear RAY CHU, and my brand does as much as possible to show inclusivity. [I don't know why we don't see disabled bodies in the majority of fashion week shows] however, it's something we [should] all work on".

so rather than taking that risk - many avoid the conversation of disability inclusion altogether.

As expected, adaptive brands lead the way when it comes to having runway line-ups representative of a large portion of the population. Unhidden, headed by founder Victoria Jenkins, will be the first to

For those unfamiliar with the inner workings of castings at fashion weeks, [usually] each show has a casting manager who auditions or selects models from modelling agencies. The problem arises when traditional modelling agencies are not actively signing disabled models. Laura Wilson, the co-founder at Zebedee Talent, a talent agency for models with disabilities, explained that although they are busier year-on-year with more high-street brands casting disabled models, they are still "featured in only around 1% of advertising - disability is the last thing to get considered when people are thinking about inclusion". Zebedee was launched in 2017 after sisters-in-law Zoe and Laura found that disabled models were looking for representation, and traditional agencies would not entertain working with someone with a disability. Laura explained that brands are "afraid of being called out as tokenistic", and



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