Written by Julianne Malveaux, NNPA Columnist
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The unemployment rate rose from 8.1 percent to 8.5 percent and more than 600,000 people lost their jobs last month. Just this year, more than 2 million have lost jobs. Since the recession began more than 5.1 million have been separated from their work. Some have gone back to work, but many have not been able to find employment. By anyone's assessment, this is an employment crisis that undermines the possibility of economic recovery.

President Obama managed to zip through European capitals with his message of hope and confidence, but the numbers belied his message. He says we can fight this economic slump and he is right, but the fight is likely to be longer than he plans.

Our unemployment rate of 8.5 percent is high, but it is an underestimate of the real deal. When part-timers and those who have dropped out of the labor force are counted, we are speaking about 15.6 percent or more. African Americans are experiencing 25 percent rates or more, rates that are greater than those experienced in the Great Depression.

The numbers are a cold reflection of the everyday realities of people who struggle to eke out a living and maintain their lives and lifestyles. Unemployment rates are a harbinger for other challenges, such as the foreclosures that affect too many people who can no longer pay their mortgages.

Why can't we let some of these people stay in their homes? Who benefits from vacant properties sitting on the market?

Our attention tends to focus on those who lose their jobs, but what about those who remain? It is hard work to be a labor market survivor, to pick up the work of those who were let go, the work of those whose essential contribution to the workplace is undermined by our shaky and shady economy.

What do you do when you are the one left? Do you rejoice that you maintained employment? Mourn the loss of a co-worker? Ask for more money because you are now doing two or three jobs? Cower at asking because all jobs are at risk? For all the sympathy we have for the person fired, is there equal compassion for the survivor who wonders when the next shoe will drop, when the next job will be lost.

It is hard work to navigate survival in this recession. Hundreds of thousands of workers rise every morning to go to workplaces that are in peril.

They go to work hoping to contribute and knowing that they are walking on a tightrope, tottering someplace between hope and despair.

It is hard work to manage the balance, providing best effort while at the same time managing expectations about a future with or without a job. It is hard work managing one's way through this employment cycle, navigating the jobs that are out there and the jobs that are being lost.

And yes, there are jobs out there. Even as the unemployment rate soars, there are companies that are hiring people in the middle of recession. People cannot internalize statistics to the point

that they are paralyzed by negative possibilities.

In other words, even as we hear that the unemployment rate is high, we must know that somebody is hiring, that there is turnover, that there are opportunities and possibilities.

More than one hundred young women will graduate from Bennett College for women on May 9. Some of them will go to graduate or professional school, and some of them have found employment.

Those who have not yet solidified their plans cannot give up – there are still opportunities and possibilities, including entrepreneurship and the possibility of self-employment.

The challenge for these young women is to embrace the roller coaster of our nation's economic life and stake their claim in the midst of this unsettling climate.

It's hard work to enter the labor market in the middle of a weak economy; hard work to try to claim a space even as others are being shed from the economy.

While the class of 2009 faces tremendous challenges, my experience suggests they are equal to the challenges. They are fired, fierce, and focused. Ready to take the world on. Ready to invest the hard work that will be necessary for economic survival.

Dr. Julianne Malveaux is President of Bennett College for women. She can be reached at pres bennett@bennett.edu