

There are lots of ways to 'read' information. There is a tactile copy of our project logo in the printed version of the report A tactile image is one that you can understand by touching rather than by looking at it. This works well for people who are blind or visually impaired. The logo is a female symbol – a circle joined to a 't'. There is a computer inside the circle as a symbol of one type of Adaptive Technology.

This is the short version of the final report. It is also available on CD in Rich Text Format (rtf), Microsoft Word (.doc), PDF, Braille (Duxbury) and Plain Language formats.

A detailed report or Full Report is available on CD in Rich Text Format (rtf), Microsoft Word, PDF, and Braille (Duxbury). Summary and Full Reports are posted on the ILRC website: <http://www.ilrc.nf.ca> .

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Note: People in the photos have given permission for their pictures to be used. These are not necessarily pictures of women who were in the project.

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Executive SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of a research project that examined the experiences and perspectives of unemployed, underemployed, and employed women with disabilities, and their knowledge of and need for adaptive technology.

Adaptive technology is one of the often mentioned solutions to the issue of unemployment and underemployment among women with disabilities. This issue has been well documented but only minimally addressed. This report identifies some of the systemic obstacles that must be dealt with before adaptive technology can be an effective solution. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for addressing these systemic barriers.

The method used to identify and report these findings was participatory action research. This approach to research intends to build relationships between identified communities – in this case, the disability community and the university community. This report represents the collaborative efforts of twelve women with disabilities from the St. John's, NL area, two Executive Directors of the Independent Living Resource Centre in St. John's, a university academic with the Division of Community Health at Memorial University of Newfoundland, and a woman with disabilities who is both a graduate student in the Women's Studies Program at Memorial University of Newfoundland and an active member of the Independent Living Resource Centre.

The guiding principles of participatory action research are consistent with the Independent Living Principles adopted by the Independent Living Resource Centre. These principles promote and support women with disabilities in controlling their own personal experiences, making informed choices, taking risks with the choices made, and taking responsibility for those choices.

Background

According to the Office for Disability Issues,¹ half of all working-age Canadians with disabilities are unemployed. When data are broken down by gender, some sources report up to 75% of women with disabilities are unemployed, underemployed or living below the poverty line.²

The Disability Rights Movement created a social model of disability that assumes *all* persons with disabilities have a right to equal and full participation in society.³⁻⁵ For women with disabilities, full participation is reflected through economic self-sufficiency.⁶ To become economically self-sufficient, women must have sustained employment in environments that accommodate individual needs.

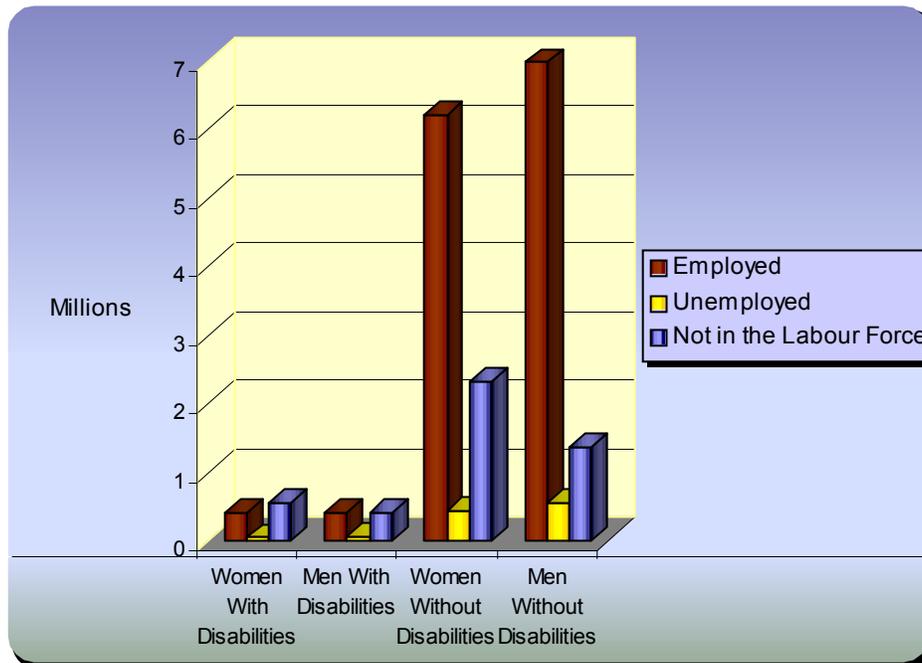
Currently, universal access to a computer equipped with adaptive technology is regarded by some experts as the tool of choice for increasing workplace access and expanding employment opportunities for women with disabilities.⁷

The women who participated in this study disagree with this assessment saying that adaptive technology is not the solution to workplace inclusion. These highly motivated women have, at a minimum, a high school education and many have post secondary education, and experience using a computer. For adaptive technology to be a viable solution, numerous other complex barriers to employment and education must be addressed.

UNEMPLOYMENT and Underemployment

Data on Canadian labour force activity collected in 2001 by Statistics Canada illustrates the dramatic difference in employment figures for people with disabilities (Table 1). When compared to the general working-age population, women with disabilities have a significantly lower employment rate.

Table 1: Canadian Labour Force Activity for Women and Men With and Without Disabilities (2001)⁸



One of the consequences of underemployment and unemployment is the risk of living in an environment that is poorer than most of society. Women with disabilities are at greater risk for living in relative poverty or living in varying degrees of social exclusion or both.^{5, 9, 10, 20}

Moreover, the World Health Organization notes that people who live in poverty have higher rates of disease and chronic illness, and shorter life expectancy than those who do not live in poverty.⁹

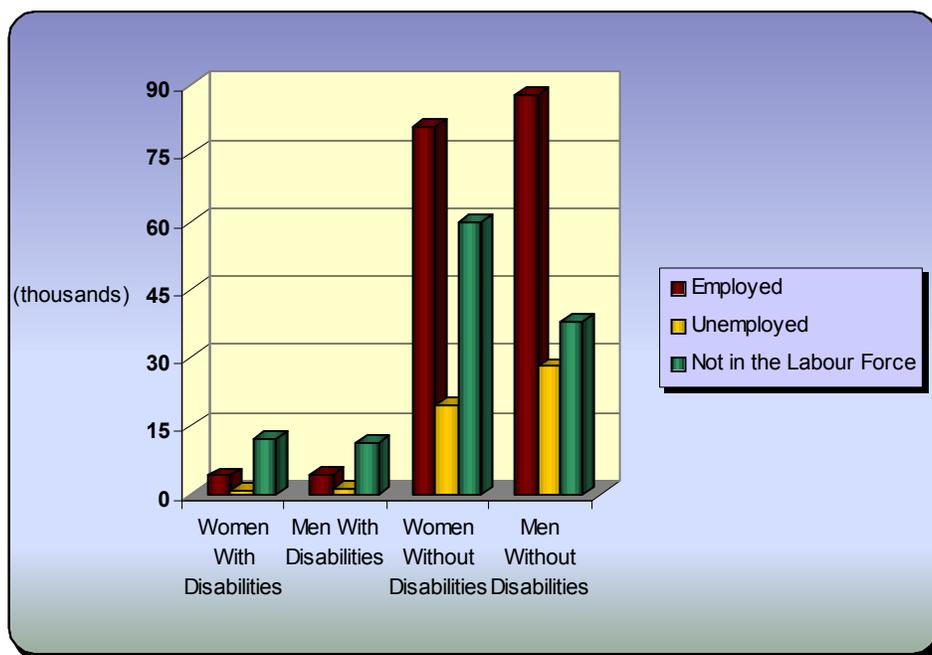
Employment Equity LEGISLATION

Canadian federal employment equity policies and programs are said to rank among the most advanced in the world.^{11 (p13)} Despite this, the Office for Disability Issues acknowledges the complexity of securing employment opportunities for minority groups such as people with disabilities.^{1, 10}

Newfoundland and Labrador is one of two provinces in Canada without employment equity legislation or pay equity legislation. On average, women in NL receive an income 70.5% of their male counterpart.¹² More women in NL receive social assistance benefits than men and 23% of all people receiving these benefits do so because of illness or disability.¹²

Statistics Canada employment data collected in 2001 for Newfoundland indicates employment patterns similar to national statistics (Figure 2). NL women with disabilities experience a drastically lower rate of employment.

Figure 2: Labour Force Activity for Men and Women With and Without Disabilities (Newfoundland 2001)¹³



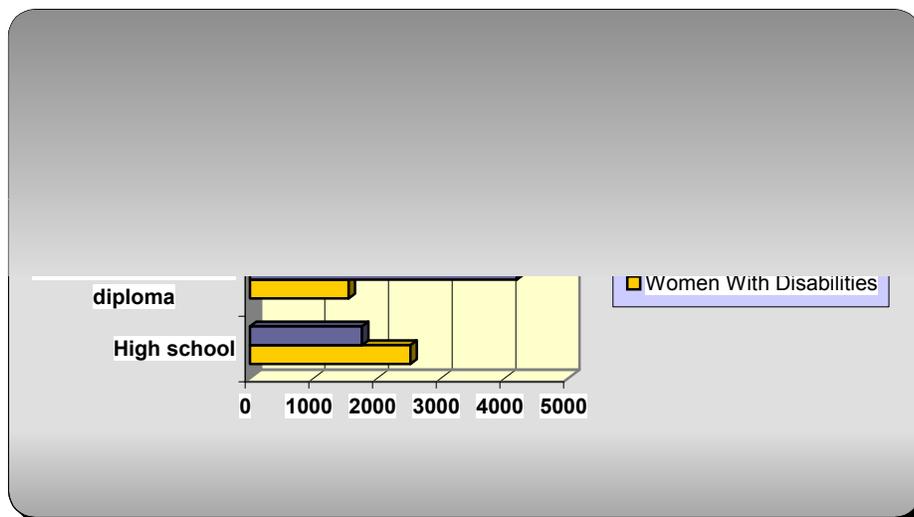
Study participants claim that employment equity and pay equity legislation is necessary in NL because the current system of voluntary workplace inclusion of people with disabilities is not working. Relying on employers to *do the right thing* is not enough. Employment equity legislation intends to “address issues of workplace recruitment, retention and promotion among designated groups that experience systemic oppression in society”.^{11(p10)} Women with disabilities are a designated group that would benefit from employment equity and pay equity legislation in NL.

EDUCATION and Employment

In general, higher levels of education are associated with higher rates of employment.

A large number of people with disabilities do not complete high school. Figure 3 compares post secondary education among men and women with disabilities in Newfoundland. Women with disabilities outnumber men with disabilities in all sectors of post secondary education except the trades and technology sector. Almost twice as many women as men with disabilities graduate from university.

Figure 3: Post secondary education trends for women and men with disabilities (Newfoundland 2001)¹⁴



According to some researchers, women with disabilities do not enjoy the same benefits from higher levels of education as women without disabilities.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Women with disabilities who engaged in post secondary education report higher levels of self-esteem than women with disabilities who do not.

This study supports these earlier findings. All women in this study had completed high school and several had some post secondary education. Most were unemployed or underemployed.

DISABILITY: Concept and Lived Experience

There is no single, widely accepted definition of disability. The word 'disability' encompasses a range of meanings.

A report called *Defining Disability* was written in response to a recommendation from the House of Commons Subcommittee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities.¹ This report presents the views of disability advocates, academics, mental health representatives, and medical professionals. While the government and some community agencies called for greater consistency of interpretation, it was generally agreed that disability cannot be defined in absolute, all-inclusive terms.

Perspectives on Disability

There are many perspectives of disability. The Canadian government recognizes three perspectives of disability.¹

1. **The impairment perspective** is a view point that regards physicians, health professions and the medical research they produce as the experts on disability. Disability is seen as an impairment of the mind or the body or both and a condition that needs to be fixed or treated.
2. **The functional limitation perspective** is similar in some ways to the impairment perspective. The focus tends to be on quantifying disability in terms of the physical and social limitations imposed by physical or mental disability.
3. **The ecological perspective** assumes that the experts of disability are those who have lived the experience. Self-identifying or not self-identifying as a person with a disability is regarded as a personal choice.

INDEPENDENT Living

The ecological perspective emerged from the Disability Rights Movement. This movement gained momentum after the American civil rights and second wave feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The disability rights movement assumes that *all* persons with disabilities have a right to equal and full participation in society.^{3, 4} Full participation in society is a basic human right and a measure of full citizenship in the broadest sense.

One aspect of full and equal participation is the idea of independent living. The philosophy of independent living is the opposite of the apartheid-type structure that historically institutionalized persons with disabilities, separating them from the rest of society. That separation was justified as a necessary aspect of fixing, treating or rehabilitating the individual with a disability. In keeping with the impairment and functional limitations perspectives, individuals with disabilities were treated as patients.

The philosophy of independent living does not regard the person with a disability as a client or a patient but rather as a consumer. The consumer is a person with the lived experience of disability and who is capable of controlling her own life experiences, making informed choices, taking risks with the choices made, and being responsible for those choices. This philosophy is most successful when the consumer is provided adequate disability related supports.

One of the community partners in this research is the Independent Living Resource Centre. The Centre structures its mission statement on the principles of Independent Living.

Participatory Action RESEARCH

Research Method

Participatory action research is a way to build knowledge and understanding between identified communities. In this case, a relationship was formed with a community of women with disabilities, the Independent Living Resource Centre, and the academic community of Memorial University of Newfoundland. The purpose of this research method is to include members of these communities in all aspects of the research. The goal of sharing power between researchers and participants is to ensure that participants' voices are heard throughout the process and in the final product. Making space for participants' voices was an essential part of inclusion and a way of affirming their human rights.

Strengths of Doing Participatory Action Research with Women with Disabilities

There are four principles of participatory action research that are referred to when research includes women or men with disabilities.^{18 (p106-7)} These principles are:

1. Individuals with disabilities themselves articulate the problem and participate directly in the process of defining, analyzing, and solving it.
2. Direct involvement of people with disabilities in the research process facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of their social reality.
3. The process of participatory research can increase awareness among individuals with disabilities about their own resources and strengths.
4. The ultimate goal of the research endeavor is to improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

Research Limitations

This report does not represent a comprehensive picture of employment and adaptive technology for all women with disabilities in Newfoundland and Labrador. Rather it documents the experiences of a particular group of women in the greater St. John's area who met over a period of several months in 2004-2005.

These women's narratives were rich in information. Their perspectives were fluid and ever reshaping from the beginning of the project to the final editing of this report. Although great attention was given to including the varied perspectives of all participants, it was not possible to present here all ideas that were collected.

Decisions about what was included and what was omitted in this report were negotiated with the identified communities. While there continued to be some differences of opinion, everyone involved in this research supports the final document.

PARTICIPANT Profile

The participants are diverse in the type of disability they identify, their age (Table 1), education, and experiences with employment and adaptive technology. Because of the small number of women with disabilities in this relatively small geographic area, this participant profile is limited to a few general categories to protect the identity of the participants.

Table 1: Representation of Participants According to Age

Age Range (years)					
Number of Participants	3	5	3	1	12

Participants self-identified with various types of disabilities including:

- Developmental
- Learning
- Blind or visually impaired
- Mobility
- AIDS related complications
- Chronic pain

Three participants were employed full time, two were working within the disability sector and one was on long-term disability. Other participants were seeking employment or attending post-secondary schooling. One participant was retired from full time employment. Most participants do extensive volunteer work in the community.

Some women said they had become pessimistic over the years about securing long term paid work. They reported extensive histories of job programs and placements. This experience provided minimal access to secure, full-time employment with health care or pension benefits. Some reported employment with little more than a living wage while others reported no employment opportunities.

All women in this study had completed high school. While eight women had substantial post secondary education, most had participated in a variety of training activities including technology certificates, vocational assessments and work placements, intake assessments, skill development, occupational therapy, skills upgrade, and Dress for Success. Their experience was that higher education, vocational training, and workplace experience had not enabled them to overcome other systemic barriers to satisfying, sustained employment.

Participant TECHNOLOGY PROFILE

Computer Use

To develop a technology profile, participants were asked to indicate the extent of their computer use. All participants reported almost daily use of computers. All participants communicated throughout this study via email.

Ten of the twelve women with disabilities had access to a computer in the home. The other two have computer access either at work or in other places. One participant stated she has Internet access when she could afford it.

All but two participants used the Internet for job searches or gathering other types of information. One participant who had a sensory disability reported that the Internet was too frustrating for her to use on a regular basis.

Eleven participants reported they did not shop on-line. Reasons for this varied from distrust of the system to not owning a credit card.

Use of Adaptive Technology

Participants were also asked about their experience with adaptive technology. Adaptive technology is defined as “computer software and hardware that have been modified to be accessible by people with disabilities, or equipment created to be compensatory tools for people with disabilities”.^{7(p3)} According to this definition only a few participants had experience using some adaptive technology. Most did not. More interestingly, the participants had their own ideas about what constituted adaptive technology (see Table 2).

Table 2: Participants’ Reported Experiences using Adaptive Technology

Participant	
A	[I use] “Kurzweil, tape recorder, JAWS, [and] Dragon Dictate or Dragon
B	[I use a] “height adjustable desk, [but] little other”
D	[I use] “computers with WordPerfect and Microsoft Word, [and no adaptive technology].”
F	[I do not use adaptive technology] “I am not sure what is out there.”
H	“minimal” [use of adaptive technology]
J	[I volunteer in a] “Canadian-Newfoundland and Labrador Community Access Program site”
L	“I use adaptive technology everyday in both my personal and work life. Adaptive technology helps me work, read, communicate, learn, write and note take independently.”

Who are the EXPERTS?

Those who create adaptive technology are usually considered the experts. They define what constitutes adaptive technology on behalf of people with disabilities.

Women who are experts in the types of accommodation they need characterize adaptive technology much more broadly than technology experts. One woman put it this way: “Adaptive technology can be many things. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a piece of software or a piece of complicated equipment or something that costs three or four thousand dollars.”

One woman said, “I think it’s whatever you need to give you a good quality of living. For me it’s a two-inch lift on my left shoe because if not I couldn’t walk across the room.” Another agreed, “Well I think it could be anything from a feeding device to a computer device. It’s all adaptive.”

Others disagreed with this all-inclusive definition. Instead they limited their idea of adaptive technology to any item that enabled them to better use a computer. Items such as adjustable workstations, Braille texts, and arm supports were considered adaptive technology. At least one woman in this study believed that the concept of adaptive technology should be “limited to anything that plugs in.”

While the study participants did not agree on a common definition of adaptive technology, they did agree that adaptive technology is their word to claim ownership of (or not). They regard themselves as experts in what might reasonably be considered adaptive technology.

UNIVERSAL Computer Access

For the purposes of this discussion, adaptive technology is a means to gain universal computer access. This means that all women with disabilities should have access to necessary supports for using a computer. Universal computer access can be individualized. What works for one person may not work as well for another. Originally some adaptive technology was designed to suit the needs of a particular disability. Over time however these lines of distinction have disappeared as individuals with all kinds of disability found the value of versatility in the hardware and software.

Findings and RECOMMENDATIONS

The following findings and recommendations are based on the experiences expressed by women with disabilities who engaged in participatory action research with community partners. The recommendations are aimed at government and non-governmental agencies, educational institutions, employers, and individuals interested in promoting employment and educational advancement for women with disabilities.

FINDING # 1

Women with disabilities face numerous obstacles to sustained and satisfying employment. Among the obstacles are difficulty accessing education, transportation, and adaptive technology in the workplace as well as the low self-esteem that comes with facing closed doors again and again.^{1, 11, 15, 20} As a result, many women live a cycle of unemployment and underemployment. One of the solutions adopted by Alberta was to create an Office for Disability Issues. The mandate of this Office is to promote positive attitudes towards disability issues, removal of barriers to government programs and services, and provide a reference point for people with disabilities.¹⁹ However, some disability advocates warn this type of system may lack accountability and effectiveness. A 1991 NL study into the feasibility of a Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities recommended a different structure similar to the NL Women's Policy Office.²¹ This new structure would work across institutions to ensure inclusion and accommodation and would analyze how new and existing policies affect and exclude persons with disabilities.

Recommendation:

- *Support the recommendation of the Report of Proceedings: Public Forum²¹ and the Proposal for the Creation of a Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities²² to create a NL Disabilities Policy Office responsible for doing policy work in partnership with external organizations doing the advocacy work.*

FINDING # 2

Employment opportunities reported by women with disabilities are alarmingly low even among women with advanced educational preparation. Women want long term jobs that will provide them with benefits and income security. Although the federal and provincial governments acknowledge employment problems experienced by women with disabilities^{5, 10, 12} there is no effective action plan for improving employment opportunities.

Recommendation:

- *Develop a comprehensive action plan for addressing the employment crisis reported by women with disabilities.*

FINDING # 3

A total of 75 employment equity and strategic initiative jobs in the provincial civil service are designated for people with disabilities. This is insufficient. More jobs must be made available. Some of these must be designated specifically for women with disabilities. It is the responsibility of both levels of government to make this happen.

Recommendation:

- *Increase the total number of employment equity and strategic initiatives jobs in NL and designate some jobs specifically for women with disabilities.*

FINDING # 4

Few public or private sector employers have voluntarily implemented employment equity. Memorial University of Newfoundland is one employer that has responded voluntarily to this call.

When members of the disability community ask why women with disabilities are not being hired, few employers have mechanisms in place to explain why jobs are so elusive for this group. Women feel that neither government nor employers are accountable for explaining why women with disabilities are less able to gain workplace entry.

Recommendations:

- *Establish a mechanism for employers to document strategies used to recruit, select, and promote women with disabilities.*
- *Make accountability reports available upon request to community organizations.*

FINDING # 5

Currently, women with disabilities in Newfoundland and Labrador depend on employers' *voluntary* participation in employment equity. Voluntary participation has not increased the numbers of employed women with disabilities in this province.

Recommendation:

- *Enlist the support of disability organizations, feminist organizations, and other concerned individuals and groups in lobbying the provincial government to legislate employment equity.*

FINDING # 6

Participants report that securing full time work under the employment equity and strategic initiatives can be difficult. Those who have the necessary education and job skills say they still face logistical and financial obstacles relating to transportation and relocation. Women with disabilities, disability community representatives, and those working within government equity initiatives must ensure that the allocated equity jobs are accessible to the designated population.

Recommendations:

- *Identify and establish the suitability of designated jobs within Employment Equity and Strategic Initiatives in collaboration with members of the disability community.*
- *Build into the job program disability related support for transportation and relocation.*

FINDING # 7

Employers in NL, many of whom are small businesses, are not equipped to address the unique issues that come with using workplace adaptive technology. Women with disabilities want to meet with employers, policy makers, and representatives from disability organizations and other community organizations to discuss the use of workplace adaptive technology.

Recommendation:

- *Develop a collaborative community-based approach that puts women with disabilities at the center of the discussion about employment and adaptive technology in the workplace.*

FINDING # 8

Processes for accessing disability related support for employment are slow. Women report lost job opportunities because of delays in accessing workplace accommodation. Funders and employers must respond in a timely fashion so that employment opportunities are not lost.

Recommendation:

- *Expedite access to disability-related supports required for employment purposes.*

FINDING # 9

Adaptive technology is linked to government departments rather than to the individual who requires it. This rule limits portability of technology across departments and the possibility of renewed employment for a woman with a disability. For example, when a woman accepts a short term contractual civil service job, she will receive adaptive technology as a disability related support. When her contract ends, so does her access to this adaptive technology. Should she apply for a contract in another department, she or her prospective employer must negotiate to have the adaptive technology transferred or acquire the same supports in a new department. Lack of portability of adaptive technology means that women with a disability can be seen as having an added cost attached to their employment unlike the applicants without disabilities.

Recommendation:

- *Establish a policy that links adaptive technology directly to the individual rather than a government department.*

FINDING # 10

Adaptive technology tends to be institutional and unappealing in appearance. Mainstream technology tends to be trendy and appealing to its consumers. This visible difference in the workplace can make users of adaptive technology feel less deserving as workers and consumers. Women with disabilities want to be treated as consumers deserving of similar attention to buyer appeal. More appealing adaptive technology may promote wider use and acceptability by women with disabilities and those who work with and employ them.

Recommendations:

- *Establish accessible mechanisms for consumer feedback about adaptive technology.*
- *Educate manufacturers of adaptive technology that appearance and function are important to this consumer group.*

FINDING # 11

The Canada Newfoundland and Labrador Community Access Program at the Independent Living Centre in St. John's has a Centre of Excellence in Adaptive Technology. With the exception of the ones located in Industry Canada's community access program sites, few public internet sites offer adaptive technology. Moreover these sites do not have on-site staff who are fluent in adaptive technology and able to expand and maintain the equipment and offer training to potential users.

Recommendations:

- *Ensure continued funding of the Centre for Excellence in adaptive technology at the Independent Living Centre in St. John's, NL.*
- *Evaluate the strengths and areas for improvement of all provincial community access program sites with a view to improving access to adaptive technologies.*
- *Use the results of the evaluation to justify improved funding for adaptive technology and resource personnel for all provincial community access program sites using the St. John's site as a model for excellence.*

FINDING # 12

Adaptive technology is a disability related support. Therefore it should be exempt from tax as are other forms of disability related supports.

Recommendations:

- *Recognize adaptive technology as a tax exempt disability related support.*
- *Provide tax rebates for disability related supports not covered by health insurance.*

FINDING # 13

Initially, certain adaptive technologies were designed to accommodate the needs of those with specific disabilities. Funders of adaptive technology categorized disability related supports according to the type of disability for which they were initially designed. Over time, these technologies have proven useful to a wider range of users. However, the classification system has not evolved to reflect this wider use. Therefore, some women with disabilities do not have access to the full range of adaptive technologies.

Recommendation:

- *Revise the current categorization of adaptive technology by disability to reflect broader suitability and usage.*

FINDING # 14

Adaptive technology has the potential to transform the employment and educational experiences of all women with disabilities. Some women with disabilities question the value of adaptive technology in facilitating workplace entry. For them, adaptive technology adds to the perception that disability is about being needy or deficient. One participant puts it this way. "From an employer's perspective, they see one person who needs adaptive technology versus another person who doesn't. Who are they going to hire?"

Recommendations:

- *Promote public awareness by initiating a media campaign that educates all Canadians about the value of adaptive technology.*
- *Create widespread educational directive that enables women with disabilities the opportunity to become fully informed about adaptive technology.*
- *Fund a position at the fully accessible Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Community Access Program in the Independent Living Resource Centre in St. John's, NL to identify and disseminate information about the value of adaptive technology.*

FINDING # 15

Education is associated with better health and a higher standard of living.^{5,7,9,10} Women with disabilities report physical, structural, and attitudinal barriers to equitable access to higher educational institutions and programs in NL. Students also have a responsibility to ensure they receive the supports they require within educational experience. Participating in post secondary education must be supported by an institutional structure which allows them to assume some responsibility and challenge inaccessibility issues.

Recommendations:

- *Establish formal links between educational administrators and women with disabilities to identify site-specific barriers and solutions to improve access to institutions and programs.*
- *Support the development of formal and informal mechanisms for students with disabilities to raise accessibility issues within their institutional settings.*

FINDING # 16

Women report that the application form for the Canada Study Grants for Students with Disability is difficult to complete and appears to be aimed at youth living at home. The form asks for the names and addresses of parents which is inappropriate for mature students. The application form asks for proof of "need of one dollar". Women do not know how to demonstrate this type of need. Moreover, women do not know if receiving these funds will jeopardize their status with other programs. Some say that it is safer not to take the risk of applying for a student grant. This grant must be re-examined for all of these reasons.

Recommendation:

- *Examine the application process for the Canada Study Grants for Students with Disability.*

FINDING # 17

Some women with disabilities do not have a well formed plan for making the transition from the better supported environment of education to the less supported environments of employment in the private and public sectors. Startling gaps in support for career planning is due in part to the structure of some systems. For example, some women reported having to return computers and other adaptive technology to a funding agency after completing their education. Funding agencies regard adaptive technology as temporary methods of coping with education and not as necessary supports for women making the transition to employment. Thus adaptive technology is tied to a specific site or institution rather than to the individual as she moves from one site to the next.

Recommendations:

- *Reassess funding guidelines for adaptive technology to allow for the portability of equipment as women transition from an educational setting to a workplace setting.*
- *Educate those working in the offices for career development at educational institutions about the value of adaptive technology in making a timely transition from education to employment.*
- *Fund research to investigate career planning mechanisms for women with disabilities.*
- *Provide information sessions to women with disabilities (prior to beginning post secondary education) about the type of employment opportunities available to them through Employment Equity and Strategic Initiatives.*

FINDING # 18

Just like other members of society, there are a variety of health and personal reasons why some women with disabilities are not able to seek or hold employment at any given time. Computers and other adaptive technology have many applications that enhance women's personal lives such as reading, communication, organizing daily tasks, and accessing current information. Maintaining computer skills is especially important to women when they are ready to re-enter the workforce. However, few women with disabilities have incomes that enable them to get and maintain adaptive technology for personal home use. The cost of transportation and child care limits access to technologies in public spaces such as libraries and the Canada Newfoundland and Labrador Community Access Program.

Recommendation:

- *Establish mechanisms for improving access to adaptive technology for personal use and career development of women with disabilities.*

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13. Table 2 is based on Statistics Canada (2001) data on labour activity available at: <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-587-XIE/tables/html/table3/nl3.htm>
<http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-587-XIE/tables/html/table4/nl4.htm>
14. Table 3 is based on Statistics Canada (2001) data on education available at: <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-587-XIE/tables/html/table3/nl1.htm>
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