

MESSAGE FROM THE TASK FORCE CHAIRPERSON

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AND

# RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR

Women Willing to Work:

An Exploratory Investigation of

the Economic Integration of

Women with Disabilities in Nova Scotia

Seventy-nine women  
contained in Women Willing to Work  
Integration of Women with Disabilities in Nova Scotia  
and Recommendations of this Report.

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for the

Task Force on

The Economic Integration of

Women with Disabilities in Nova Scotia

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## MESSAGE FROM THE TASK FORCE CHAIRPERSON

As a way of marking the end of the "Decade of Disabled Persons" (1982-1992), the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women in partnership with the Disabled Persons Commission, the Coordinating Council on Deafness of Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia League for Equal Opportunities, last year, formed an Ad Hoc Task Force. With funding from Employment and Immigration Canada, the Task Force - The Task Force on the Economic Integration of Women with Disabilities in Nova Scotia, hired a Project Coordinator to undertake a research project which would identify the barriers to employment for women with disabilities across the province.

Seventy-nine women with disabilities were contacted and the findings are contained in **Women Willing to Work: An Exploratory Report on the Economic Integration of Women with Disabilities in Nova Scotia**. This is the Executive Summary and Recommendations of this Report.

Marcie Shwery-Stanley  
Chairperson

Task Force on the Economic Integration of  
Women with Disabilities in Nova Scotia

## **TASK FORCE ON THE ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN NOVA SCOTIA**

### **Task Force Members**

**Marcie Shwery-Stanley, Task Force Chair** - Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women

**Donalda Crawford** - Canadian Paraplegic Association

**Linda DeBaie** - Society of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Nova Scotians

**Margaret Hiltz** - Nova Scotia League for Equal Opportunities

**Sandi Kidston** - Coordinating Council on Deafness of Nova Scotia

**Charlie Macdonald** - Nova Scotia Disabled Persons Commission

**Burke MacCallum** - Nova Scotia Disabled Persons Commission

**Mary MacLennan** - Member at Large

**Anne MacRae** - Coordinating Council on Deafness of Nova Scotia (to September 1992)

**Donna Merriam** - Employment Connection, Atlantic Centre of Research, Access and Support for Disabled Students, and Canadian Mental Health Association (Nova Scotia Division)

**Joyce O'Rourke** - Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women

**Linda Schnare** - Nova Scotia League for Equal Opportunities

**Kathi Whiston** - Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women

## Member Organizations

Atlantic Centre - Employment Connection. Located on the campus of St. Mary's University, the Atlantic Centre of Research, Access and Support for Disabled Students has provided services in post-secondary academic and training programs across Nova Scotia for students with disabilities. Utilizing interpreter services in the classroom, technical aids instruction and loan program, volunteer notetakers, academic counselling, a learning disabilities lab, and a wide range of needed supports. The Centre steadily improves access to post-secondary educational institutions for students with disabilities.

Since 1988, the Employment Connection Program of the Atlantic Centre has been based upon a partnership model with business, community resource groups, educational institutions, and government agencies. The Program's self-help philosophy coupled with one-on-one counselling and job search skills training assists the job candidate with a disability to secure real work with an employer wanting to hire a highly motivated and skilled employee.

Canadian Paraplegic Association (Nova Scotia). The Canadian Paraplegic Association (Nova Scotia) assists individuals with spinal cord injuries by actively supporting efforts in prevention, education, rehabilitation and research, while promoting the optimum quality of life for mobility disabled persons.

A wide range of services includes personal and family counselling and covers areas such as specialized equipment, housing, transportation and employment. CPA trained personnel become closely involved before clients leave hospital and continue the provision of resources and information when they return home and throughout the life time of the client. As well, they facilitate community awareness and opportunities for integration.

Co-ordinating Council on Deafness of Nova Scotia. The Co-ordinating Council on Deafness of Nova Scotia is an advocacy group representing Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals. The Council was established in 1976 to secure the rights of an estimated 55,000 deaf and hard of hearing Nova Scotians. We advocate for better qualitative and quantitative education and for better access to programs and information. The Council addresses all human right issues affecting the deaf and hard of hearing communities.

Society of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Nova Scotians. The Society of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Nova Scotians is a non-profit organization that was incorporated in 1980 with the goal of developing and managing coordinated services to assist deaf and hard of hearing people in gaining full access to existing public, private and community services. Services provided by SDHHNS are (1) interpreter services, (2) Silent Outreach (employment counselling) and (3) Project Access (information and referral). The Society has regional offices in Halifax and Sydney.

Nova Scotia League for Equal Opportunities. LEO is a cross-disability consumer and public education organization whose members include individuals with all types of disabilities: mobility, sensory and invisible. It provides a consumer perspective on provincial issues which affect the daily lives of Nova Scotians with disabilities. LEO offers municipal consumer groups an umbrella organization through which to represent their concerns at the provincial level. The uniqueness of the League rests in the fact that it is an entity made up of local organizations from across Nova Scotia whose control rests with persons with disabilities. The facets of community which are of chief concern to LEO are human rights, employment, education, housing, public accessibility and technical aids.

LEO's national organization, the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPOH), represents issues of national importance, and LEO liases with COPOH to represent Nova Scotian citizens with disabilities in those issues. Through COPOH, LEO has representation on Disabled Persons International (DPI).

Disabled Persons Commission. The Disabled Persons Commission, an agency of the provincial government, is comprised of 12 members, the majority of whom must be disabled. The Commission provides for the participation of persons with disabilities in the development of government policies and programs which directly relate to or affect them. It ensures that their concerns will be promoted and considered by the government, especially in matters of policy and where concerns affect several departments of the government. It provides a mechanism to facilitate communication of information on programs and services available to Nova Scotians with disabilities.

In addition, the Commission provides a mechanism to review existing government policies and programs which relate to or affect persons with disabilities and ensures that

they are appropriate, effective and reflect the needs and concerns of the community. The Commission is primarily responsible to the Government of Nova Scotia, through the Coordinating Committee of Ministers, which is chaired by the Minister Responsible for Reporting on Disabled Persons (the Minister of Community Services).

Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women. The Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women is mandated to monitor women's issues in Nova Scotia and to act as an advisory body to the provincial government. It is legislated to advise the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women on matters relating to women as they are referred to Council for consideration. In carrying out its duties, the Council receives and hears petitions and suggestions concerning women; undertakes and recommends research on matters relevant to women; recommends and participates in programs concerning women; proposes legislation, policies and practices to promote equality of opportunity and status; and publishes reports, studies and recommendations.

The Council is comprised of 11 women from across Nova Scotia appointed through Order in Council. Its office is located in Halifax where it maintains a resource centre of current information on women's issues. To reach women in areas outside of metro Halifax-Dartmouth, the Council has field work programs operating in Cape Breton, Cumberland, Colchester-East Hants, and Digby-Annapolis counties.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ten years which marked the "Decade of Disabled Persons" (1982-1992) was a period of progress with respect to the situation of persons with disabilities. Yet, with the close of that decade, there remains much to be done to achieve equality for women with disabilities. There is, most importantly, a compelling need to identify concrete strategies for accomplishing their fuller participation in the economic mainstream. To meet the needs of women with disabilities, these strategies will need to take into account the double disadvantage they face based on the combined effects of their gender and their disability.

Members of the Task Force believe that development of appropriate strategy to confront the specific needs of women with disabilities, must come from the women themselves. This preliminary research project was developed with that imperative in mind. Its primary purpose was to consult in some depth with Nova Scotian women who have disabilities, about the barriers they face and the solutions they might recommend to enable their fuller participation in the economic mainstream.

### Research Methodology

This study was intended to be exploratory, descriptive research. The two primary information-gathering tools used were face-to-face structured interviews and focus groups. In total, 79 women with disabilities were selected from eight geographical areas in Nova Scotia, using a non-random convenience sampling methodology. Of the 79 women involved, 15 also participated in three focus groups in Halifax and Truro. The interviews addressed eight main topic areas: (1) basic demographic characteristics; (2) educational background; (3) current employment status; (4) past employment history; (5) experiences of employed respondents; (6) experiences of looking for work; (7) experiences of not being in the workforce; and (8) income and needs.

The purpose of the focus groups was to enrich the exploratory data gleaned from the 79 structured interviews. It was expected that the groups would add depth to the information, as women explored and compared their experiences together, and that the groups would provide an opportunity to brainstorm creative ideas for changes to better meet the needs of women with disabilities.

### **Characteristics of the Women**

The age of the women ranged from 20 to 65 years, with ages quite evenly distributed throughout the range. The average age was 39 years. A wide variety of disabilities was represented, falling into three main categories: mobility, visual and hearing. Disabilities had begun at birth for thirty-seven (46.8 percent) of the women; an additional 17 women became disabled before the age of 19. Thus, a total of 57 out of 79 (68.3 percent) were disabled before they reached adulthood. More than half (54 percent) had more than one disability.

### **Self-Esteem, Support, Advocacy**

Low self-esteem was frequently experienced by the women in the study, a product both of being women and of having disabilities. This made it more difficult for them to overcome the substantial barriers they faced in trying to get the education or employment they wanted. Support was key for many of them in pursuing their educational and employment goals: positive attitudes on the part of family, friends, counsellors, doctors, co-workers, and teachers. Most were not aware of any opportunities for engagement in support or advocacy groups specifically concerned with issues affecting women with disabilities.

### **Experiences with Education**

In general, the formal educational attainment of the women in the study was fairly low. Thirty-seven women (46.8 percent) had completed high school including five who had received the General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Another 30 (37.9 percent) had less than Grade 11; six of these had no formal education. Twelve women (15.2 percent) were unaware of the grade level attained, having gone through a non-graded system.

Despite limited formal education, 51 of the women had managed to pursue educational opportunities through universities, community colleges, computer or business schools, correspondence courses and/or other programs including career-specific programs. Twenty-nine of those 51 women studied two years or less in post-secondary institutions, while nine women had more than four years post-secondary education.

For the most part, training or educational programs taken after leaving school were considered accessible, and the women were fairly well satisfied with them. At the



same time, a number of barriers were named which may have limited their educations, or may simply have made them more determined in their pursuit of education. Obstacles women named included negative attitudes, physical inaccessibility, lack of funding for support services, lack of needed technical aids, and poor quality of education.

Existing sponsorship programs such as VRDP (Vocational Rehabilitation for Disabled Persons) were considered helpful, inasmuch as without them the women would not have been able to afford to get the training or education they wanted at all. However, the women did have a number of problems with the existing programs, particularly with the inflexibility of program policies. Perhaps more significant, though, is the fact that almost half of the women were entirely unaware of these sponsorship programs, and still others had inaccurate understandings of eligibility requirements or program policies. Clearly there is a need for accurate information to be made more widely available.

### **Experiences with Employment and Unemployment**

While 72 of the 79 women (91.1 percent) had been employed at some point in their lives, only 20 (25.3 percent) were employed at the time of the interviews. Seven women reported having to give up their jobs due to marriage, child care problems, or sexual harassment. Twenty-seven others had lost their jobs as a direct consequence of their disabilities, though most had left without being fired or laid off when their disabilities reached the point where they could no longer do their work and adaptations were not forthcoming. Other common past employment experiences were of tokenism, dead-end jobs, low pay, and exploitation.

Of the 20 women who were employed at the time of their interview, eight were working part-time and 12 full-time. The greatest percentage were employed as clerks in various settings. The majority of these women reported being satisfied with their work, and with their incomes. One of the factors most strongly related to employment satisfaction seems to have been the supportive attitudes on the part of co-workers and supervisors. This was also one of the features that women considered most important in the accessibility of their workplaces. The majority of the respondents considered their workplaces accessible. Where appropriate accommodation was not available, the assistance of co-workers was particularly important to allow the women to do their jobs.

Twenty-seven of the 79 women (34.2 percent) were unemployed and looking for

work. They felt restricted by transportation difficulties, lack of formal education, and lack of paid work experience. Job interviews were hampered by inaccessible locations, lack of interpreters, transportation difficulties, and application formats that do not accommodate those with print-handicaps, such as those with learning disabilities, visual impairments or low educational levels. Many women felt they were rejected at the application or interview stages because of their disabilities.

Fifteen of the women had made use of employment agencies. They had mixed opinions, however, about the effectiveness of these agencies, depending primarily on the individual employment counsellors they encountered.

Thirty-two respondents (40.5 percent) were unemployed and not seeking work, for a variety of reasons. The main ones were the severity of their disabilities, lack of education or training, and fear of losing the medical and pharmaceutical benefits they are entitled to on social assistance. Several of these women are simply not able to undertake job searches or to find work adapted to their disabilities. Other reasons included lack of accessible transportation, inaccessibility of workplace, lack of alternative job arrangements, unavailability of child care, and the fact that their incomes from working would be less than their social assistance incomes. However, they experience life on social assistance as degrading, humiliating and discriminatory. Given the opportunity, and the support services they need, most would prefer to be employed.

### Incomes

Not surprising, in light of limited educational and employment opportunities, most of the women had income levels well below the poverty line. Sixty-one (77.2 percent) received less than \$12,000 per year. Of these, 28 (34.4 percent of the total sample) had annual incomes under \$6,000. Three women had no income at all, and only six women had annual incomes over \$18,000.

Forty-one (51.9 percent) of the women expressed strong dissatisfaction with their incomes. Fifteen women said it was not enough to live on; nine more said it was barely enough. For many, there was insufficient money for food, clothes, or other expenses. Women whose incomes were less than \$12,000 a year had the greatest difficulty, relying on friends, family and food banks to get by. Though women with incomes over \$12,000 seem somewhat better able to scrape by; but there was never any extra money to deal

with unexpected expenses, repairs or emergencies. None of the women had incomes sufficient to account for the extra costs inherent in having a disability; such costs as those related to purchasing and maintaining necessary technical and mechanical aids and services, dietary requirements or other necessities specific to the disability itself.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In light of the study findings, which are consistent with a broad range of existing reports documenting the economically disadvantaged circumstances of women with disabilities, the Task Force on the Economic Integration of Women with Disabilities in Nova Scotia makes the following recommendations:

### **General Recommendations**

1. That the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women and the Disabled Persons Commission, in conjunction with the Task Force, give high priority to joint initiatives aimed at the following three purposes:
  - (a) to seek funding from the Department of the Secretary of State through the Disabled Persons Participation Programme to organize a one-day workshop for women with disabilities in Nova Scotia. The specific aims of the workshop would be: (i) to enable women with disabilities to become aware of the findings of this study and to consider appropriate strategy development; and (ii) to explore interest in and possible funding sources for an on-going organization of women with disabilities in Nova Scotia to promote on-going self-help strategies and peer support.
  - (b) to raise public awareness about the seriously disadvantaged position of women with disabilities in Nova Scotia.
  - (c) to promote the development of a significant research proposal under the program of joint research funding recently announced by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Status of Disabled Persons Secretariat, Department of the Secretary of State. This proposal should engage the academic community, in partnership with the women's and disabled communities, in conducting significant on-going research into the

specific concerns of women with disabilities in Nova Scotia.

2. That the Government of Nova Scotia in partnership with the Government of Canada assure the provision of publicly funded, universally accessible, high quality child care; and that such accessibility specifically include physical accessibility for parents and children with mobility and other physical disabilities.
3. That the Government of Nova Scotia give high priority to revising the Nova Scotia Building Code in order to ensure effective enforcement of the barrier-free design provisions of the code.
4. That the Nova Scotia Department of Transportation and Communications establish an incentive funding initiative with the existing Transport Canada funding under the National Strategy for the Integration of Persons with Disabilities. Such funding would increase the utilization of this program and promote the establishment of accessible services in small town and rural Nova Scotia.

#### **Education and Training Recommendations**

5. That universities, community colleges and other post-secondary educational institutions redress current and historical discrimination by instituting affirmative action policies and programmes designed to fully integrate women with disabilities into their educational offerings. Such affirmative action should include provision for educating professors, instructors, administrators and other officials concerning the systemic barriers faced by students with disabilities, and their needs for educational accommodations (such as oral examinations, extended deadlines, and exams in alternate forms or visual sign language).
6. That the Nova Scotia Department of Education actively promote the hiring of more teachers with disabilities in the regular school system, community colleges and universities to enable students with disabilities to identify with positive role models.
7. That the Nova Scotia Department of Education develop training and sensitivity modules for administrators, teachers and guidance counsellors in the public school system in the province in order to eliminate pervasive stereotyping and other misconceptions contributing to lowered academic achievement expectations for women with disabilities.
8. That the Nova Scotia Department of Education in partnership with local school

- boards give high priority to making facilities housing publicly funded educational programs physically accessible to students with mobility and other physical disabilities.
9. That VRDP (Vocational Rehabilitation for Disabled Persons) provide women with disabilities an opportunity for full participation in decision-making about their educational and support services needs. Students must have significant input into the selection of the support services and accessibility devices they need in order to perform well in their studies. This policy would replace basic standardized assessments of needs based upon categories of disability.
  10. That VRDP actively promote the involvement of women with disabilities; and that the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services develop and distribute widely an easily readable plain language brochure to give direction to persons wishing to apply for assistance under this program.
  11. It is recommended that technical aids and support services issued for the purpose of training under VRDP, be made available on a permanent basis upon completion of the training. This would particularly benefit women who typically enter the VRDP program with few or no financial resources at their disposal.
  12. That funding under VRDP be extended to include programs and support services at the post-graduate educational level.
  13. That, in partnership with the deaf community and former students, the Inter-Provincial Resource Centre for the Hearing Handicapped undertake evaluation and appropriate revision of its programme of education, especially with regards to the use of sign language during instruction, the implementation of a standardized grading system, the use of deaf teachers as role models, and any other areas of concern to the stakeholders.
  14. That the Nova Scotia Department of Labour, in consultation with the Disabled Persons Commission, sponsor educational opportunities designed to sensitize members of the Provincial Labour Force Development Board to the barriers faced by women with disabilities, and to familiarize them with services available under VRDP and other sources.
  15. That Canada Employment Centre training programs extend eligibility to women with disabilities, whether or not they are in receipt of Unemployment Insurance benefits.

### Employment Recommendations

16. That the Government of Nova Scotia immediately give priority to employment equity through affirmative action to addressing the barriers to employment and upward mobility for employees who are women with disabilities; and that the definition of clear equity goals, strategies and timetables take due account of the combined negative effects of gender and disability on employment and promotion opportunities for women with disabilities.
17. That the federal government review the criteria of its Employment Equity Program with regard to the inclusion of workplace with less than 100 employees, and with particular regard to rural areas.
18. That the Government of Nova Scotia develop a clear policy of accommodation to the requirements of persons with disabilities in accessing employment opportunities administered through the Nova Scotia Civil Service Commission. Such accommodation should include interpreter services and attendant services, as well as day care for women with disabilities who are restricted from accessing interviews.
19. That Canada Employment Centres declare a high priority on job training and job placement opportunities for women with disabilities. Job training programmes should contain a significant module addressing the prevalent low self-esteem among women with disabilities resulting from the long-standing discrimination they have experienced; and job placement efforts should address directly the long-standing and significant systemic barriers to the participation of disabled women in the labour force.
20. That Canada Employment Centres make job postings accessible in alternate media and ensure that all CEC funded outreach projects and programs are located in facilities accessible to persons with mobility and other physical disabilities.
21. That the Nova Scotia Department of Supply and Services undertake an audit to determine the accessibility of provincial government facilities; and that the Department of Supply and Services review and adopt federal government policy relating to the accessibility of owned and leased office space.
22. That Canada Employment Centres provide support for accommodation to those individuals with disabilities who are applying for employment through CEC programs. This would include such items as attendant services and interpreter services, and

- importantly, day care services.
23. That Canada Employment Centres, in partnership with consumer-based community organizations, develop and implement a program of sensitivity and awareness training for employers, the media, the community, women with disabilities, etc. This programme should highlight the abilities of women with disabilities in the workforce.
24. That all technical devices purchased through Employment and Immigration Canada grants for accommodation purposes in the workplace be on permanent loan to the woman with a disability to ensure real freedom in employment opportunities.

#### **Income Support Recommendations**

25. That the Province of Nova Scotia eliminate the two-tier social assistance system in Nova Scotia and replace it with a single provincially administered system which recognizes the unique costs of being a woman and having a disability.
26. That, in moving towards a provincially administered system, any disincentives to employment which may impose a barrier to women with disabilities should be eliminated (for example, loss of prescription drug coverage, attendant services, etc. upon gaining employment).

#### **Information Recommendation**

27. That the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, in partnership with the Disabled Persons Commission, compile, maintain and disseminate information on all programs and services available to women with disabilities. Such information should be available in alternate formats as required.