"Your Say, Your Rights"

A Project about Information and Communication Technology and Women with Disabilities

Women with Disabilities Victoria
and **Self Advocacy Resource Unit**

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This report is a summary of a participatory project conducted between May to November 2011to elicit women's views on access to ICT.

The Project Coordinator author of this report was Chris Jennings. Special thanks are extended to Chris for her work on this project.

This summary report was edited by Sarah Boyd, Women with Disabilities Victoria, and Anusha Kenny.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women with Disabilities Victoria in collaboration with the Self Advocacy Resource Unit (SARU) undertook a project which looked at the use of technologies to increase social support and information opportunities for women with disabilities. The *Your Say Your Rights* project had a focus on reaching women with disabilities who are particularly isolated.

The project conducted a series of roundtables for women with specific disabilities who, to varying degrees, experience isolation, lack access to information, and lack input into decision making in the community.

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED:

- The ability to access and use Information Communication Technologies (ICT), including the internet are a critical part of modern society. It is vital to ensure the inclusion of all women with disabilities in the digital age. The right to digital inclusion is founded in both international treaty obligations and state legislation.
- There is a "digital divide"
- Women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to being digitally excluded because of the following factors:
    - Safety concerns are more likely to be held by women than men;
    - Stereotyped perceptions about ICT and gender;
    - Cost;
    - Lack of access/support.

KEY BENEFITS OF ICT FOR WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES:

- Digital technologies, including the internet, have the capacity to empower women by giving them opportunities to develop meaningful contacts and access to more information.
- The constraints of the built environment with all its physical barriers make it difficult for many women with disabilities to independently use public spaces. ICT offers women flexibility in time and space and can be of particular value to women who are socially isolated.
- Women's satisfaction with social life increases with connection to the internet (BCS, 2010).
- Within online forums or communities, people with disabilities can chose to conceal or reveal their disability. Individuals maintain a right to non-disclosure rather than denying the existence of impairment (Burns & Blanchard, 2010).

- Social networking sites have already become a major component of various activism movements and could play a particularly important role in disabilities activism (NDC 2011).
- The internet allows women with disabilities access to what government, community service providers, academic institutions, and experts — at a local, state, national and international level — have to say.

KEY SOLUTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION IDENTIFIED:

Digital inclusion requires solutions underpinned by innovation, universal design and access, rights, leadership and collaboration.

- Adopt universal design principles:
    - Innovation in universal design increases access for all. It is about making the generic product as accessible to as many people as possible. Adopting the concept of universal accessibility now and into the future is vital to ensure digital inclusion.
- Create an encouraging gender friendly ICT Environment
    - A priority in the consulting with, advising of and training for women with disabilities is to create an encouraging environment where women who are tentative about using technology are empowered to have a go.
- Campaign for stronger government leadership:
    - Speak to politicians and government officials about the need for a comprehensive digital inclusion strategy for women with disabilities that address barriers to digital involvement.
- Promote and share best practices:
    - Share best practices among networks, both online and offline.
    - Engage ICT companies in addressing digital exclusion of people with disabilities
- Research:
    - Support opportunities for women with disabilities to participate in future research into advances in technology and digital inclusion.
- Collaborate:
    - Work with other organisations and sectors to promote and support digital inclusion.
    - Work with government to identify, prioritise and address the technology challenges that women with disabilities face.
    - Collaborate with innovative practice that uses ICT as a tool in tackling social isolation and exclusion.
- Educate:
    - Seek funding to provide educational opportunities for women with

disabilities to learn about safe use of the internet.

‘YOUR SAY, YOUR RIGHTS’ PROJECT PARTNERS

WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES VICTORIA

Women with Disabilities Victoria is a not for profit organisation made up of women with disabilities, who support women with disabilities to achieve their rights in Victoria. The organisation seeks change through community education, research, providing leadership training for women with disabilities, and influencing government policy and community services. It represents the interests of all women with disabilities, regardless of the nature of the disability and with respect to diversity of race, culture, age, sexual preference and location within Victoria.

Women with Disabilities Victoria seek to focus on those areas where gender inequity and/or disability inequity have the biggest impact on the experience of women with disabilities to be able to be respected and fully experience life. Currently these areas of focus are violence against women with disabilities and access to health care, with a secondary focus on parenting rights and employment equality for women with disabilities.

To find out more, go to www.wdv.org.au , email us at wdv@wdv.org.au or call (03) 9286 7800.

THE SELF ADVOCACY RESOURCE UNIT (SARU)

SARU resources and assists Victorian self advocacy groups for people with an intellectual disability, people with an acquired brain injury and people with complex communication support needs. Self advocacy groups are run by people with disabilities who have joined together to have their voices heard and support each other. They work together to make sure they have the same rights, choices, and opportunities as anyone else.

SARU has been funded to ensure the meaningful inclusion of people with a disability in organisational structure, strengthen existing self advocacy groups, support the establishment of new self advocacy groups, promote network development, develop resource materials to support self advocacy and describe and improve adviser (support worker) practice.

To find out more, go to www.saru.net.au, email saru@rosshouse.org.au or call (03) 9639 6856.

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- The women with disabilities who contributed to the roundtable discussions, for their willingness and openness in sharing their experiences. It is through their voices that we can learn and strengthen our advocacy.
- The self advocacy groups who welcomed the project worker into their meetings, including:
    - Brain Injury Matters (BIM) (www.bim.org.au) - run by and for people with an acquired brain injury;
    - Victorian Deafblind Advocacy Group;
    - Speaking Up for Ourselves - a self advocacy group for people with complex communication support needs due to multiple physical impairments;
    - Reinforce (www.reinforce.org.au) - a state-wide self advocacy group for people with an intellectual disability;
    - New Wave - a self advocacy group for people with an intellectual disability based in Gippsland;
    - Learning and Participation - for people with an acquired brain injury in Northcote.
- The professional staff who gave their time to contribute their knowledge to the development of the project.
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- The Victorian Women's Trust (www.vwt.org.au) for their generosity in financially supporting the project.
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INTRODUCTION

The ability to access and use Information Communication Technologies (ICT), including the internet, are a critical part of modern society. It is vital to ensure the inclusion of all women with disabilities in the digital age. Research notes that the internet has been widely used by individuals, organisations or groups to collectively discuss, share or even mobilise action on varying issues. The barriers faced by people with physical disabilities have been radically changed by the internet which removes barriers to communication and interaction that many people face in the physical world.[1]

However, there are a number of gender issues that impact on women with disabilities. Women with disabilities would benefit from the opportunity to extend or develop skills in using ICT to increase their capacity to inform government and the broader community about the issues they face.

Starting from the premise of the right to Equality of Access this report looks at the digital divide, gender and technologies and digital inclusion. It also suggests practical solutions to ensure greater access for women. [2]

[1] For more information see: http://www.w3.org/standards/webdesign/accessibility (accessed 9 July, 2012).
[2] For more information please see the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), in particular Article 9, which defines ICT accessibility.

BACKGROUND

Women with Disabilities Victoria in collaboration with SARU applied for and were successful in receiving a Victorian Women's Benevolent Trust Grant for a project which looked at the use of technologies to increase social support and information opportunities for women with disabilities. The *Your Say Your Rights* project had a focus on reaching women with disabilities who are particularly isolated.

The project conducted a series of roundtables for women with specific disabilities who, to varying degrees, experience isolation, lack access to information, and lack input into decision making in the community. The roundtables offered opportunity for information exchange, sharing and creative problem solving, focusing on learning more about topics such as '*Facebook! Is it for me?' 'How to safely use Social Media'*, *'How WIRE (Women's Information Referral Exchange) uses technology to stay in touch with women'*, '*How technology could be used in the role of a self advocate*?' and '*What's all the excitement over the iPad?'*

THE RIGHT TO ACCESS

STATUTORY FRAMEWORK

Almost one in five Australians has a disability, and the proportion is growing. In Victoria, more than 500,000 Victorian women experience disability. The full and independent participation by people with disability in web-based communication and information delivery makes good business and marketing sense, as well as being consistent with society's obligations to remove discrimination and uphold human rights (HREOC 2009).

Treaty obligations

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (the UNCRPD) stresses among other things that States should take appropriate measures to ensure persons with disabilities have access to information and communication technologies. Australia is a signatory to this Convention. Additionally Australia is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the related Optional Protocol.[3]

The United Nations states, in order to secure equal treatment for women with disabilities; it is not enough to outlaw discrimination with laws and policies. To address the legacy of discrimination that women with disabilities have experienced, positive or compulsory measures must be applied. Affirmative action quotas should be established where women with disabilities are underrepresented (UNFPA 2008).

We need to identify ways to use ICT proactively and effectively to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women (UN 2005).

Victorian Law

Victorian law supports the rights of women with disabilities to access information to uphold their legal rights. Legislation such as the *Charter for Human Rights and Responsibilities* 2006 and the *Equal Opportunity Act* 2010, oblige the Victorian Government and many organisations to take pro-active steps to increase access and reduce gender-based discrimination.

[3] For more information about CEDAW see http://www.hreoc.gov.au/sex_discrimination/publication/archive/cedaw/aus_sign_cedaw.html and

Policy

In 2010, the *National Disability Strategy* (NDS) was developed to improve the lives of people with disabilities, to promote participation and to create a more inclusive society. The NDS includes high-level outcomes such as equal social, economic and cultural participation of people with disabilities and their families.

The (draft) Victorian State Disability Plan 2013-2016 will also guide service delivery in Victoria.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

The Digital Divide, or digital exclusion, is the gap between people with effective access to digital information and communication technology and those with very limited or no access at all. It includes the imbalances in physical access to technology as well as the imbalances in resources and skills needed to effectively participate as a digital citizen (Caslon Analytics website, February 2007). Studies confirm that people on low incomes, without tertiary education, living in rural/remote areas, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, with disabilities, with a language background other than English, and aged over 55 are less likely to be online (Caslon Analytics).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and World Bank's inaugural *World Report on Disability* found that disabled people are half as likely as non-disabled people to have a computer at home, and even less likely to have internet access at home.

Disability reduces the ability to earn an income and accumulate wealth therefore there is a direct link between economic disadvantage and disability (Ashford, 2009). There is overwhelming evidence that people with disabilities are at much greater risk of poverty and disadvantage than almost any other group of people in Australia. For many people it is frequently the financial costs of living with a disability that greatly increases this risk (AFDO 2009).

The barriers to online access include interrelated issues including: set-up and access costs; lack of physical access; disinterest; lack of confidence; feeling it's beyond personal ability to learn or understand; fear and security concerns; lack of skills and training opportunities; and limited reading skills.

Women with disabilities who participated in the *'Your Say, Your Rights'* project roundtables also expressed feeling overwhelmed when faced with making decisions about what technology to purchase, and difficulty understanding contracts for mobile phone and internet plans.

Many people with disabilities have difficulties accessing and processing information because of the way in which it is presented. The heavy reliance on conventional forms of communication, such as text and spoken word, excludes many people with disabilities. Broader reach can be facilitated through the use of pictures, video,

captions, and the utilisation of text-to-speech and speech-to-text applications.

The Digital Divide and Social Exclusion

Research shows an overwhelming correlation between digital and social exclusion. People counted as socially excluded are also likely to be digitally excluded (UK online centres & FreshMinds, 2007).

The 2009 National Disability Strategy Consultation Report *SHUT OUT* clearly shows that social isolation is one of the biggest challenges facing individuals living with a disability. The report demonstrates that regardless of the definition of disability or the perspective taken, people living with a disability can be at an increased risk of mental health problems due to the social isolation they experience (Burns & Blanchard, 2010). In order to achieve a socially inclusive society, all Australians need to have the resources, opportunities and capabilities to engage by connecting with people and using their local community's resources, learn by participating in education and training, have a voice so that they can influence decisions that affect them (Australian Government, 2010).

The concept of the digital divide refers not only to physical access to computers, connectivity and infrastructure, but to the other factors which reduce access to ICT. These include geographical, economic, educational, cultural and social factor that create barriers to social inclusion.

Technology is now widely recognised as a critical enabler of an individual's socioeconomic development. Cost can act as a real disincentive for access to the internet and other ICT. As more and more people get online, those who remain offline will drop further behind the rest of society. As computer ownership becomes the norm in the community, new forms of disadvantage have developed. Exclusion from ICT can compound disadvantage for women with disabilities, with many experiencing either limited or no access to computers. When they do have access, it is most likely limited to outdated computers, timed and restricted internet usage, and out of date software, rather than access to a 'state of the art' multimedia environment.

There are social commentators writing about how the numbers of 'information poor' are growing in the 21st century. 'Information poor' refers to the extreme differences between those who have access to information and those who don't. There is a rising trend for the internet to be the first source to gather and distribute information.

Some of the challenges encountered by individuals with lower incomes and literacy levels are the same as those that everyone experiences from time to time:

- annoying pop-ups,
- too many choices,

- Slow connections.

People with adequate knowledge and resources can however overcome these frustrations by: buying a faster computer or getting broadband at home, turning on the pop-up blocker or paying someone to remove a virus that is causing problems, scan and discern quickly enough to pick out the best website choices from the millions the search engine serves up. But for the economically disadvantaged who may also have a disability, these problems can feel overwhelming and can prevent people from engaging with ICT.

The Right to Communicate

A lack of accessible communication and information affects the life of many people with a disability. Individuals with communication difficulties such as hearing impairment or speech impairment are at a significant social disadvantage in both developing and developed countries. This disadvantage is particularly experienced in sectors where effective communication is critical, such as in health care, education, local government and justice (WHO & the World Bank, 2011).

The 2010 Deakin University study into Assistive Technology (AT) use and outcomes in Victoria found there was high demand for equipment that was not currently obtainable under the Victorian Aids & Equipment Program funding. A high demand for 'generic' items such as mobile phones and computer applications was identified. In all instances, the 'generic item' was an essential part of a highly customised AT solution that produced desired life outcomes. For example a type of mobile phone that can download communication applications for customised use (Layton & Wilson 2010).

Evidence suggests that socially excluded people often have as much or more to gain from new technologies as anybody else (UK online centres, 2007). Digital inequality matters because those without the right combination of access, skill, motivation or knowledge to make digital decisions are missing out in all areas of life. The fact is that those left on the wrong side of the divide today are more deeply excluded, harder to reach and further away from inclusion than ever before (UK online centres 2007).

GENDER AND ICT

Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA) have identified the need for women with disabilities to be included in the information technology revolution, particularly the Internet. The Internet is seen by many women with disabilities as an important accessibility aid to access mainstream information and services, as well as information to meet their specific needs as women with disabilities (WWDA 2002).

The digital divide is the experience of many women with disabilities. Women with disabilities are over-represented in low socio-economic groups, compared to men with disabilities and women in general. When looking at labour force participation, women with disabilities are particularly affected, with a participation rate of 49% - well below the 60% participation rate of males with disabilities and the 77% participation rate of females without disabilities (ABS 2009). Research suggests that if women are employed they are more likely to use technology. Therefore women with disabilities facing numerous barriers to workplace participation are effectively being restricted in their access to information and communications technology.

A major barrier to accessing ICT is cost. Many women with disabilities cannot afford to use ICT as part of their daily routine. Of the women who participated in *Your Say Your Rights* many spoke of having to cut internet connections to afford a mobile phone, and of having time in the month when they went without phone credit. Another major obstacle is lack of information. Many women with disabilities do not know about the available technologies that would meet their needs. *Your Say Your Rights* participants spoke about not knowing who to talk to about their technology needs or where to get good technological support and advice.

Lack of access to ICT deprives women with disabilities the opportunity for social connectedness afforded others in the community. The 2011 Able Australia report on *Telecommunications and Deafblind Australians* was based on the results of a survey of the Deafblind community. Of those surveyed Able Australia had 71 responses returned. The findings showed 58% of deafblind men had a mobile phone compared to 38% of deafblind women. In relation to computer usage, 69% of deafblind men had a computer and internet connection compared to 64% of deafblind women. The findings also showed that only 13% of deafblind women surveyed had used Facebook, compared to 31% of deafblind men (Able Australia, 2011). The deafblind women who shared their experience with *Your Say Your Rights* talked about high levels of frustration at their inability to have meaningful input into government services and decision-making. They spoke of extreme isolation within their own community, the disability community and the broader community, and how they want the opportunity to explore how increased connection with and use of new ICT could assist them to increase their participation in their communities.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S USE OF THE INTERNET – WHAT WOMEN SAID ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE

Your Say Your Rights aimed to increase women's awareness of the positive impact ICT could have in their lives. In order to move from digital exclusion into digital inclusion, women with disabilities will need the motivation and means to use technology, and appropriate support to gain the necessary skills and confidence in their ability to utilise their new skills. Women with disabilities who do not use technology (or who do not use it effectively) are restricted from doing so by at least one of the following factors: interest; awareness; access; affordability; training; on-going support. These factors are more than likely to be inter-related, with women experiencing more than one barrier to digital inclusion.

Technologies have different impacts on women, men, boys and girls. Gender inequality also permeates women's access to technology, opportunities for empowerment and the damaging impact of sexist and violence-supportive technologies on women and girls, boys and men (United Nations, 2005). Gender stereotypes that maintain gender inequality persist in both access to and control of ICT. An example is gender stereotypes that maintain the view that women are less technologically able than men.

Safety

Women are more likely to be concerned about safety considerations than men. Early research on this issue cited the internet as an unfriendly and unsafe environment for women, noting that women were often harassed and subjected to negative comments from men. In recent years women's groups have worked to increase and promote the safe use of technology by women. The *Your Say Your Rights* project encountered many women — particularly women with intellectual disabilities — who felt that computers were unsafe and therefore not for them. For some women it was their personal history of sexual abuse that made them fearful of the Internet. Women expressed anxiety around controlling who sees personal information and emotional and financial vulnerability. Most women cited hearing stories in the media regarding the safety risks involved with joining social networking sites. A number of women with intellectual disabilities said family and friends had discouraged their use of the internet. Considerable work needs to be done to build women with disabilities' understanding of how to manage their security online.

Women that were part of *Your Say Your Rights* spoke of feeling fearful of social media like Facebook. They spoke of personally feeling under pressure to 'accept friends' and having safety concerns. One woman had had pornography posted on

her Facebook page, and another had her son's ex-girlfriend post a number of lies about her online which were hurtful.

At the *Your Say Your Rights* roundtables internet-connected computers were made available for women's use. A positive environment was created to allow women to talk about any barriers they have to using ICT, and to discuss the possible benefits of the internet. Presentations on the safe use of social networking sites were enthusiastically embraced. Women were exposed to the potential benefits of social networking and most expressed a keen desire to learn more.

Perceptions that ICT is an Irrelevant and Unfriendly Tool for Women

An individual's understanding of the relevance of ICT to their lives, anxieties about technology, and levels of personal confidence are key determinants of whether they will make a start with computers and the internet (Kunzmann & Stevens, 2010).With many non-users also showing the strongest resistance to getting online, there is a very real possibility that they will be left further behind in a society that is increasingly digitalised in how it conducts social, public service and commercial transactions (Kunzmann & Stevens, 2010). Women's fear of technology may present as a lack of interest. However, the *Your Say Your Rights* roundtables found that a number of women with intellectual disabilities had not much exposure to and experience with technologies, and talked about finding them intimidating. Participants with complex communication support needs due to multiple physical impairments didn't immediately see personal computer access as relevant to them.

Women with disabilities may need encouragement to see the personal benefits to technology access, and to believe that the potential benefits are worth the frustration and effort needed to learn and engage with ICT. Women need to know that the potential benefits of internet are not just limited to one area of wellbeing, but could positively impact across a range of areas including finances, social engagement, skills, employment and leisure (UK online centres, 2011).

Computer interfaces are used in many areas of everyday life, from banking machines to ticket dispensers. The internet is increasingly a channel for conveying information about health, transport, education and many government services. Major employers rely on online application systems for recruitment (WHO & the World Bank, 2011). Women with disabilities need to be aware that they cannot avoid the impact technology has on their lives.

Cost

One of the most frequently heard grievances is how overwhelming it is to navigate the task of deciding what to purchase, where to purchase it, how to connect it, and how to manage it. The costs of access to ICT can be

prohibitive, acting as a barrier to even thinking about the potential for personal ICT use. There are schemes that provide low-cost or free ICT hardware, however they are often recycled computers that do not have the necessary capacity to meet current software needs. Adaptations and assistive equipment can be too expensive. Then there is the on-going cost of accessing services like the internet. After the initial financial hurdle, women still face costs associated with installation and on-going maintenance.

To ensure equal access to web-based resources, we need subsidised internet access for the economically disadvantaged, government agencies and disability organisations that show leadership in the development of their web-based content, and widespread training on how to use the web for people with disabilities.

Training and Support

Along with technology affordability, the need for training and technical support was consistently raised as a significant issue faced by the women participating in *Your Say Your Rights.* Women with disabilities need support with set up and connection. They need to be able to access support when and as often as they need it. Participants spoke of family members helping with technical support but not being very patient, which then undermined their confidence. One woman spoke of how accessing the provider helpline was difficult because her acquired brain injury affected her ability to follow and remember instructions.

Article 24 of the UNCRPD states that persons with disabilities have a right to education at all system levels, extending to a right to life long learning opportunities. For many women with disabilities who in the past have been locked out and denied access to an education, this is an important principle to be applied in the achievement of digital literacy. Women with disabilities have varying needs, constraints and abilities that affect what they want to do with ICT and what they can do. Training and education needs to build confidence in women with disabilities who in the past have had limited or no access to ICT.

While some women voluntarily exclude themselves from ICT, others are simply unaware of the benefits and opportunities that such technologies can offer. There has been an impressive drive in Australia to promote ICT to older people. A similar drive is needed to increase participation of women with disabilities.

The Benefits of Technology for women

Digital technologies, including the internet, have the capacity to empower women by giving them opportunities to develop meaningful contacts and access to more information. While many women use technologies regularly and with satisfaction, others use them infrequently and with reluctance, avoid them entirely, or try them only to then abandon their use. Many women with disabilities have typically not had much exposure to and experience with technologies and can find them intimidating and frustrating. If we recognize that women with disabilities face increased barriers of isolation and exclusion in today's increasingly technologically connected society, we must recognise that these women need assistance to bridge personal barriers and increase their capabilities in using technology.

Gendered Patterns of Use

Women use the Internet more than men for email, instant messaging, online courses, job hunting and searching for information about health issues, government matters or commercial products and services. Conversely men are more likely to go online to play games, use online forums, download films, television or radio broadcasts, make telephone calls, get news, weather or sport or access online banking or financial trading (Benford, 2008).

Unlike their parent's generation, who use the internet as an information source, young people are using the internet (along with other ICT) primarily as a communication tool (Burns & Blanchard, 2010). It is very important opportunities are created for young women with disabilities to develop relationships and maintain communication with their peers.

The constraints of the built environment with all its physical barriers make it difficult for many women with disabilities to independently use public spaces. Through information and communication technology women can participate more fully in community. ICT offers women flexibility in time and space and can be of particular value to women who are socially isolated.

Social Benefits

There are social benefits to being online, particularly for women (UK online centres, 2011). The idea that, for women, an internet connection plays a significant social role in increasing satisfaction is reinforced by research findings. Women's satisfaction with social life increases with connection to the internet. For men, an internet connection is not a significant predictor of levels of social life satisfaction (BCS, 2010). Research results are consistent with a theory that IT access and usage helps to empower people and therefore gives them a sense of freedom and being in control. From this increased sense of freedom and autonomy, peoples' wellbeing is increased (BCS, 2010). Women who would otherwise feel isolated can provide information and support to each other via the internet.

An important part of wellbeing is social integration. Social Integration can be broadly divided into social relationships and community involvement. Where a person has other people around them that can offer support and friendship, this aids to overall wellbeing. Similarly, the more influence a person feels they have about what happens in their community, the more empowered they feel and the greater sense of freedom and control they feel. This all improves life satisfaction and ICT has been shown to play a part in this (UK online centres, 2011). As women use the Internet mostly for social networking, contacting family and friends, and for searching for health and community information, womens' life satisfaction is improved by being online.

Online communities can be particularly empowering for those with hearing or visual impairments or autism spectrum conditions, because they side step the barriers experienced in face-to-face contact. People with disabilities value the internet for enabling them to interact with others through a medium that potentially conceals their difference (WHO & the World Bank, 2011). Within online forums or communities, people with disabilities can chose to conceal or reveal their disability. Individuals maintain a right to non-disclosure rather than denying the existence of impairment (Burns & Blanchard, 2010).

Social networking sites have already become a major component of various activism movements and could play a particularly important role in disabilities activism (NDC 2011). The internet offers significant potential for empowering communities, strengthening social action and increasing community participation. It is increasingly acknowledged that the internet plays a significant role in influencing mental health and wellbeing, and health more broadly, particularly in terms of promoting key determinants - including social connectedness, civic participation, and skill development (Burns & Blanchard, 2010).

One participant in the *Your Say Your Rights* roundtables said her Neurosurgeon had suggested she access social media as a means to deal with her sense of sadness and isolation. Another woman said her world immediately broadened when she got a computer and internet connection at home.

Health Benefits

Current investigation into health and wellbeing suggests that the 'community' need not only be physically constructed. In fact, virtual communities offer great potential for social cohesion around the issues of health and health care. It has been found that access to the internet provides a boost to women's health satisfaction. With women's health satisfaction depending to a degree upon their level of social contact, the internet assists by enabling broader social interaction, as well as through providing information to help women maintain their health (BCS 2010).

As the internet continues to expand and users continue to diversify, health education sites should become even more effective in helping women with disabilities to break down traditional barriers and lead healthier lives.

Access to Services and Service Information

The internet allows women with disabilities access to what government, community service providers, academic institutions, and experts — at a local, state, national and international level — have to say. It provides women with disabilities the opportunity to join or develop forums, and to post questions, advice and words of encouragement to other women on issues that are relevant to them. It offers a platform to promote shared expertise and ideas, to discuss relevant news items, events, policies, and to share opportunities. *Your Say Your Rights* participants were keen to learn more about how they could develop their skills and confidence in using these forums in their role as disability activists.

Digital Inclusion

Social media is the cornerstone of modern communication and it is essential that people with disabilities, who are particularly vulnerable to social isolation, are able to use these tools and stay connected with the world. Computers and the internet are becoming increasingly important in enabling people to communicate, as well as to access information and services. In the context of disability specifically, they are also increasingly becoming the basis for versatile aids to assist people in overcoming their limitations and restrictions (ABS, 2009).

Social media is deeply embedded in the lives of a rapidly growing number of people as a tool for managing a wide range of social activities. Content creation and social distribution is no longer limited to a few websites, but is becoming an everyday practice across a multitude of online platforms. Internationally, the internet ranks second only to television as a source of entertainment and information in the developed world (Burns & Bahnisch, 2009). At the end of June 2011, there were 10.9 million internet subscribers in Australia (excluding internet connections through mobile handsets), demonstrating the importance of ICT in contemporary society.

The importance of women with disabilities active use of ICT depends significantly on the extent to which the rest of society is using those technologies. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures on the current spread of internet usage would suggest that we are fast approaching a time when it is no longer an issue of personal choice — those without access to the internet will be seriously disadvantaged by society's increasing use and dependence on it. As using email for written communication increasingly becomes the norm, it becomes more and more difficult to contact public or private bodies by telephone, letter, or in person. Women with disabilities' perceived competency and independence could be compromised if they were forced to become more reliant on support services to access information on their behalf.

The transmission of information and images via new media is giving individuals more power to influence debate, share information and take collective action. The

internet has a democratising impact on media production through increased user participation (Network Insight Institute 2007). News, public affairs, panel and discussion, entertainment programs, all routinely ask viewers to text, email or tweet questions, comments and feedback. For these programs to be reflective of the diversity within community and include the experience of women with disabilities, women with disabilities need to be active participants in content creation in order to have their voices heard.

Media production is becoming more reliant on individuals capturing information on mobile devices on the spot and publishing it instantly online. Twitter has been used to report high-profile events such the London bombs, Victorian bush fires, and Queensland floods. In a state of emergency the ability to access Twitter reports could become critically important for deafblind women who are unable to access radio and television updates.

Taking training in technology out to environments where women with disabilities feel familiar and safe is an essential strategy in reaching women who are isolated. As well as basic training in ICT, specialist training needs to be available to cater for the use of specialist hardware/software. The flexibility to adapt a training curriculum to women's needs and interests is vital in engaging and holding their interest.

Many women with disabilities rely heavily on support services, particularly from the non-government sector, for their everyday support. Traditionally the non-government sector has been relied upon when accessing essential services such as housing, transport, income support, counselling and advocacy. Now the new challenge is brokerage of information and communication technology as an essential service and a means of equality and quality of life (Spiral Research & Consulting, 2011). Some of the women participating in *Your Say Your Rights* who lived in supported accommodation spoke of how computer and internet access was available for staff only. The concept of NGOs assisting women with disabilities to access the ICT equipment and teaching them the skills necessary to ensure social inclusion needs to be considered. Many women with disabilities will need to rely on support services to assist them when engaging with ICT. The problem with women with disabilities turning to their support services for assistance is that these organisations are themselves often struggling to keep up with technology. NGOs need to consider their current and future role in supporting access to ICT for their client base.

Solutions

For women with disabilities to have full access to ICT there are a number of areas that need the attention of government, the corporate sector and the disability support services.

Digital inclusion requires solutions founded in innovation, universal design and access, rights, leadership and collaboration. Innovation in universal design increases access for all. Originally a term applied to the built environment, universal design is design that is usable to the greatest extent possible by everyone. It is about making the generic product as accessible to as many people as possible. Universal design is also about taking the initiative to build in 'hooks' of various kinds that allow special adaptive extensions or services to be easily and cheaply added by individuals who need them (WACC website).

The success of Apple products demonstrates how new technologies modelled on universal design can be readily adopted by the mainstream community. The iPad and iPhone support more than 30 Bluetooth wireless braille displays, with no additional software needed. The Apple iPhone is recognised as the most accessible smartphone with in-built accessible features to date. It includes a highly sophisticated screen reader, full-screen magnifier, white on black contrast, and many other accessibility features that assist people who are blind or vision impaired. It also has access features for people who are deaf or hearing impaired, including support for caption video (MAA website). Parents talk about how the iPad is a game-changer for Alternative Assistive Technology, and why it's important for their children to have devices that don't say 'I have a disability' as soon as they walk into a room with one. The use of generic products often translates into financial savings. The iPad (with a communication app) costs around $1,000, whereas a similar but specialised, disability communication system costs around $7,000.

The current suite of Apple products are the latest must-have consumer items on the market. For women with disabilities, the relative affordability, popularity and built-in accessibility of these new products make them an attractive option in an area that has been dominated by products designed for people with disabilities. Apple has raised the bar, which all its competitors will now need to meet. This will hopefully lead to further exciting accessible technology innovations.

The large range of book titles produced for eBook readers allow readers independent access to books. The use of touch screen technologies, closed captioning, and audio describing can and do establish effective communication. One example, of many products, is a free non-profit website called Video Critter4 demonstrates innovation in accessibility by making the creation of captions on YouTube videos a simple matter. ICT text-to-speech and speech-to-text real time

capabilities enable women with disabilities to proactively communicate. Microsoft has released a preview of its Window 8 operating system and early tests show that accessibility has been a major focus during development (MAA). We are seeing mainstream services and equipment embracing access features more and more.

Adopting the concept of universal accessibility now and into the future is vital to ensure digital inclusion. Engaging with expert work, such as compliance with the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) accessibility guidelines, is an important step, as is a clear commitment to ensuring assistive technologies are available and affordable for people with disabilities to access the internet and mobile technologies (CNT, 2009). [4] Once the concept of accessibility has become ingrained, and as more resources become available, it becomes easier to raise standards and attain a higher level of universal design (WHO & World Bank, 2011).

Accessibility needs to be considered early in the design process. Just as designing for the built environment cannot pragmatically factor accessibility as an afterthought, web designers need to address accessibility in the scoping and design phases of product development, rather than at the delivery stages. There needs to be more effort made to encourage the implementation of accessible web design; access to the World Wide Web for people with disability can be readily achieved if good design practices are followed (HREOC, 2009).

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), a guide for making Web sites accessible to people with disabilities. This overlaps in a number of areas with the Mobile Web Best Practices (MWBP) guide for making websites usable from a mobile device (NCD, 2011). Mobile phone users have a hard time if a website's navigation requires the use of a mouse. Design solutions to this problem assists people with mobility or dexterity disabilities. For more information about this see www.w3.org.

Whilst in recent years there have been improvements in web design and access in some areas, there is still a real need to design websites with simpler language, straightforward navigation systems easily navigable by people with low literacy and content that loads quickly without distracting pop-ups.

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission believe that government departments and agencies need to improve their provision of equal access to public information, especially for people with disabilities (HREOC, 2009).

[4] The www.w3.org makes recommendations and common agreed standards.Many of its standards define levels of conformance, which the ICT developers must follow if they wish to label their product W3C-compliant.

HREOC also recommend that government online services focus strongly on web accessibility (HREOC, 2009).

In June 2010 the Federal government announced its Web Accessibility National Transition Strategy. The strategy means all federal, state and territory websites will need to meet the WCAG 2.0 'A' standard by the end of 2012, and all federal sites will need to meet 'AA' standard by the end of 2014.

Create an encouraging gender friendly ICT Environment

Many women with disabilities have had limited or no access to ICT. A priority in the process of consulting with, advising and training for women with disabilities is to create an encouraging environment where women who are tentative about using technology are empowered to have a go. The use of peer educators in the training and support of women with disabilities to become digitally connected could be effective. Women with disabilities who have embraced ICT sharing their struggles and successes with technology could be a means to boost others' confidence and provide motivation to women just beginning to engage with ICT.

Training and Information Sharing to Empower women with disabilities

Women with disabilities need to know how to protect themselves online and be given the opportunity to develop skills to judge whether content and services are truthful and reliable. Women responded positively to having *Your Say Your Rights* provide the space to raise and discuss their concerns, and were appreciative of strategies they were given to deal with such issues. Initiatives like *Your Say Your Rights* support women to learn how to protect themselves and build confidence in their ability to be in control of the information they access and produce. Women with disabilities need the opportunity to participate in more initiatives like this.

Cost

Women with disabilities' capacity to access ICT for personal use is crucial to achieving digital inclusion. Affordability of ICT and communications services is a major concern, from hardware and devices to access to networks and related services. Women with Disabilities Australia have called for the adoption of the Disability Inclusion Allowance proposed by the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, and that this allowance is set at a realistic level taking into account the costs of accessing ICT (WWDA). Without strong government commitment to provide financial assistance to improve access to adequate ICT equipment and connection services, many women with disabilities will be denied their right to participate in digital society.

Government Policy

In a society that is increasingly digitally enabled, barriers to accessing ICT can act as barriers to accessing community services (Spiral Research & Consulting, 2011). Many women with disabilities rely on these services. Government funding bodies must recognise supporting access to ICT as a critical part of the role non-government organisations need to play to provide services to women with disabilities.

Government need to maintain a focus on planning, collaborating and acting on digital inclusion. Promote universal design of information and communication equipment by incorporating accessibility criteria in all government procurement policies and publicly funded service provider contracts. Ensure all levels of government and contracted public service providers deliver best practice in the accessibility of electronic, print, web and audio-visual communications (Able Australia 2011).

To advance the goal of an inclusive digital society Government needs to work with all stakeholders to identify, prioritise and address the technology challenges that face women with disabilities. Implementing known solutions and exploring innovative solutions involves exploring possible options for those who cannot access current technology. Regular monitoring should be instigated to support new users to ensure ongoing usage of solutions. This will allow for people to grow with the solutions and adapt the technology as their skills grow or deteriorate (CAUS website).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

The roundtable discussions and project research led to a number of key findings and opportunities for further action. These are outlined below and summarise feedback from project participants.

CAMPAIGN FOR STRONGER GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP

Speak to politicians and government officials about the need for a comprehensive digital inclusion strategy for women with disabilities, with a focus on action and investment, to achieve the change that is required to reduce digital exclusion and social isolation.

PROMOTE AND SHARE BEST PRACTICE

Post comments of congratulations when services get accessibility right. Raise general awareness of the benefits of women with disabilities being online. Let your networks know when you come across improved solutions to efficient and effective access to Information Communication Technologies.

Promote findings of this report to ICT companies.

Call for ICT companies to consider women with disabilities as a key customer group who benefit from innovative approaches.

RESEARCH

Support opportunities for women with disabilities to participate in future research into advances in technology and digital inclusion.

COLLABORATION

Work with other organisations and sectors to promote and support digital inclusion. Work with government to identify, prioritise and address the technology challenges that women with disabilities face. Collaborate with innovative practice that is using Information Communication Technology as a tool in tackling social isolation and exclusion.

EDUCATION

Seek funding to continue to provide education workshops that provide educational opportunities for women with disabilities to learn about safe use of the internet. This

educational program should prioritize the rights and needs of this women most isolated and socially excluded.

CONCLUSION

The exploratory discussion and ICT workshops held through this project confirm the urgent need to address the digital divide for women with disabilities.

All around us there seems to be this accelerated push towards more digital participation. The challenge is to ensure participation for all.

Research reveals that many people benefit from the contribution that ICT makes to their lives. Technologies, like social networking and digital media, have helped hard to reach or isolated individuals and groups express themselves in new ways.

The consultations undertaken as part of this project confirm the barriers to utilising ICT that many women with disabilities experience.

Whist improving digital inclusiveness in itself cannot solve the problem of social disadvantage; it has an important role to play in the pursuit of social advancement (Benford, 2008). The financial burden attached to disability should not become a barrier to accessing goods and services that people in the community take for granted (Ashford, 2009).

Finally, it is important that women with disabilities are given the opportunity to enjoy all the benefits that ICT have to offer. They need to be given access to communicate effectively, to interact with the content and services they desire, to create content, and to pursue their passions both online and offline.

Government, ICT companies and the community in general face a significant challenge in realizing this vision.

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