

PARENTING

LEGAL EAGLES HELP WOMEN TAKE FLIGHT

Every year thousands of abused partners turn to the Women's Legal Service for help in escaping domestic violence, but providing this essential resource on limited funding poses a real challenge, writes **Michelle Collins**

LAST year more than 11,000 women turned to the Women's Legal Service for help with domestic violence and family law issues.

Nine out of every 10 casework clients had experienced domestic violence and 50 per cent of the women they helped identified safety concerns as an immediate issue for themselves or their kids. A quarter were at risk of being homeless.

"We do our best within the funding we receive but it is an ongoing challenge and juggle to meet the ever-increasing demand," chief executive Angela Lynch said.

Ms Lynch said WLS and its volunteer network of 80 lawyers fills the gap between those women who are eligible for legal aid and those who can't afford a private lawyer.

"There are very tight restrictions on obtaining legal aid and despite many women being victims of domestic violence and needing legal protection, it remains very difficult to obtain," she said.

"We are a specialist service and recognise issues of gender bias in the law and legal processes, discrimination and structural oppression of women and, in

particular, the deep impact on the lives of women and of their children of domestic and, or sexual violence.

"We try to provide legal advice in a way that is trauma informed and that prioritises client safety. It means so much to victims of violence to have a legal service where they feel emotionally and physically safe and that prioritises their and their children's safety."

One recent case that stands out is a woman who had been raped by her husband and had called the police.

"Unfortunately, the police took a domestic violence order out against her because he had presented with visible injuries," Ms Lynch said.

"Arguably, these injuries were consistent with defence wounds as she tried to defend herself from his attack."

"The case was so shocking as you couldn't believe that in this day and age, and in Queensland, a woman could call the police in a state of shock and distress from a sexual assault but end up a respondent in a police application."

WLS also recently launched a sexual assault service for women who have been sexually assaulted and had

their counselling notes subpoenaed by the alleged perpetrator.

"The purpose of the service is to represent victims to try to stop or limit the use of the victim's counselling records in the criminal or domestic violence courts," Ms Lynch said.

"As you can imagine, it is extremely traumatic for victims to know that their counselling records might be seen by the perpetrator or their (the perpetrator's) defence lawyers."

Genevieve Dee, a Partner at Cooper Grace Ward, who volunteers at WLS and who will be putting on her dancing shoes this year to support the WLS fundraiser Dancing CEOs, said putting women in touch with information can make the decision to leave an abusive or violent partner easier.

"If you can put people in touch with information about where to go, who to contact, and what's important to take with them and what help is available to them legally, they can start to put a plan in place in their minds, for if I have to go today, tomorrow or in the next five minutes as soon as this call is over—at least I have got this number of who to call and I can go to this place and this person will help me," she said.

Ms Dee said often women were unable to access information online because they were being watched by their partner or struggled to process

the information they found online because they were overwhelmed by being constantly told by a partner that: "You are no good; you are stupid; no one is going to believe you anyway; I'm working, I've got the money to afford a lawyer."

Ms Dee added: "They start to think you have no options."

With demand for its services growing each year, WLS is always trying to come up with new ways to deliver its services.

Last year it launched an app called Penda for women who have experienced domestic violence, with a particular focus on financial abuse, in an attempt to help more women. Later this year it will begin a remote volunteering program to make it easier for lawyers who live outside of Brisbane to volunteer.

To help more women and children affected by domestic violence, support the Women's Legal Service fundraiser, Dancing CEOs, where 12 chief executives from Brisbane will compete in a ballroom dance-off at Brisbane City Hall on May 18.

The service hopes to raise \$250,000 for its telephone helpline. For more information go to dancingceos.com.au

INFORM + DEBATE + SUCCEED

“It is an ongoing juggle to meet the ever-increasing demand

WLS chief Angela Lynch



RELATIONSHIP CHECKLIST

DOES YOUR PARTNER

- Put you down, criticise you, call you names or insult you, either in private or in public
- Tell you what to wear and where you can or cannot go
- Make it difficult or prevent you from seeing family and friends or from making friends
- Monitor who you speak to or become jealous for no reason
- Push, hit, kick, throw things, choke you or damage property
- Threaten to hurt you, your

children or drive recklessly to cause fear

- Force you to have sex or engage in sexual acts which are unwelcome, painful or humiliating
- Control your money without your permission or limit your access to money
- Monitor your whereabouts, follow you, make persistent phone calls, texts or social media posts
- Ridicule your cultural or religious beliefs
- Hurt, or threaten to hurt, your pet/s

DO YOU

- Feel scared around your partner or feel like you are "walking on eggshells"
- Change your behaviour or your appearance to prevent your partner becoming angry
- Limit your contact to avoid family and friends because of your partner's behaviour
- Make decisions and choices based on your partner's reactions rather than your own wishes

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be experiencing domestic violence. Source: Women's Legal Service