



Creating Ripples within Community: Pro Bono and Volunteer Legal Assistance within Women's Legal Service (SA)

By Zita Adut Deng Ngor

Southern Domestic Violence Action Group demonstration



Each year thousands of South Australian women seek help from Women's Legal Service South Australia (WLSSA), a specialist trauma-informed multidisciplinary community legal centre. Legal services offered to women range from advice to representation, community legal education and law reform initiatives. Support services include financial counselling, advocacy and referral. Later this year WLSSA will expand its multidisciplinary team by offering mental health services to support women who are interacting with the legal system.



WOMEN'S LEGAL SERVICE (SA)
Achieving justice for women

The service is one of the few legal assistance providers in SA which truly covers South Australia, providing outreach from Victor Harbor all the way to Ceduna and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY Lands). The rural, regional and remote outreaches are supported by metropolitan outreach locations across Adelaide and health justice partnerships such as the Women's and Children's Hospital outreach.

WLSSA is spurred on to constantly look at ways of increasing accessibility for vulnerable groups of women due to the courage of women (and their families) who contact the service seeking help.

Impact of the work of WLSSA

During 2021-2022, WLSSA assisted 2,154 women. On average each woman had 2.4 legal matters.

For women seeking help, WLSSA is often the place of last resort. For a small cohort of women, it is the first time they have had the opportunity to talk to someone about their experiences of abuse after suffering for years in silence.

Whilst WLSSA would love to provide help to all the women who seek help, unfortunately demand far outstrips available resources. WLSSA is only able to assist 15 to 20% of women who contact the service each year.

For those women who receive ongoing assistance from WLSSA, being able to access trauma informed legal and support services is one of the first steps in helping them to rebuild their lives (and that of their families).

Workshop
with women
in the APY
Lands



On a phone
to the client

WLSSA's staff are trained to identify legal and non-legal issues in order to determine priorities. In certain situations, attending to issues around safety, housing and psychological and emotional wellbeing prior to legal issues is essential. Working in this way ensures that women are empowered to make long lasting positive changes within their lives and in the lives of those around them.

Pro Bono and Volunteer Impact

Pro bono help from legal practitioners and legal student volunteers is crucial in ensuring that WLSSA is able to reduce the number of women who fall through the cracks each year. WLSSA is fortunate to receive pro bono assistance from law firms such as Gadens & Anderson Solicitors, as well as barristers. The pro bono assistance WLSSA receives ranges from:

- assisting with the legal helpline;
- providing legal opinions;
- mentoring and guiding legal staff;
- professional development workshops or opportunities to join CPD workshops offered by firms to their staff; and
- taking on referrals for pro bono assistance.

APY Lands
Outreach



Pro Bono and Volunteer Legal Assistance within Women's Legal Service (SA)

The work of pro bono firms and barristers is supported by law students who have the opportunity to be involved on the legal help line, provide legal clerical support to solicitors, engage in community legal education and policy work amongst other roles.

However, there is still more that can be done by pro bono firms, legal practitioners and students. WLSSA currently has a 20% abandoned call rate because women cannot get through to the service. This means that just under 2000 phone calls per year go unanswered. Therefore, expanding and working with law students and pro bono firms is crucial in developing ways to close the gap in service delivery.

The Future...

Looking to the future, pro bono assistance will continue to be a key component of the commitment shared by all Australians to provide pathways for access to justice. Providing pro bono assistance or volunteering at a centre like WLSSA provides an opportunity to use the law in a direct and meaningful way, to have a direct, positive and long-lasting impact on vulnerable members of the community. The law is and can be a powerful tool and catalyst for change at an individual and societal level. WLSSA has opportunities available for pro bono collaborations or to volunteer. ■



Zita Adut Deng Ngor is the CEO of Women's Legal Service (SA), a specialist not-for profit providing legal and support services to women across the state of South Australia. She is a legal practitioner by profession and has worked for over 19 years in the community legal service sector.

Zita Ngor has an active interest in working with and advocating on behalf of disadvantaged groups within society. In 2001 she received a Centenary Medal for service to the community and in 2013 she was one of three NGO delegates appointed to the Australian Government Delegation attending the Commission on the Status of Women 57 in New York, USA. She was selected due to her expertise on violence against women. In 2017, she was a finalist for Australian of the Year (South Australia). In 2019 Zita was selected as one of the 40 under 40 young business entrepreneurs in South Australia and was a recipient of the Women's Lawyers' Association of SA, Dr Robyn Layton AO QC Award.

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