

Statement in response to DFSV Commissioner's Yearly Report

DFSV Commissioner's report reinforces the need for long-term funding for women's legal services

Women's Legal Services Australia welcomes the Commissioner's yearly report and its focus on justice and family law reforms in the year ahead.

Too often, Australia's legal systems are harnessed by users of violence to continue their abuse and control. Too often, women are forced to endure years of systems abuse without legal help. Too often, women's experiences are dismissed or unheard by professionals in the system.

We therefore welcome the report's recommendation to build on existing justice and family law reforms to strengthen safety, accountability and recovery for individuals and families experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence, and to ensure children's experiences, safety concerns and views are recognised and supported (Recommendation 7).

Women's Legal Services across the country see where the family law system is being exploited and weaponised to cause harm to victim-survivors, including children.

Women are being forced to negotiate with their abuser for years through complex legal processes, and too often on their own.

Many women are forced to self-represent or go into poverty to pay private lawyers to ensure the safety of their kids. Some are pressured into unsafe or unfair orders. Others feel coerced into forgoing rights to property or financial support in order to manage the risk of further abuse. Technology is evolving faster than our legal systems can respond, and perpetrators are exploiting that gap.

There is an opportunity to build on recent Family Law Act reforms to ensure that the processes, resourcing and culture of the family law system truly centres the safety and rights of victim-survivors, including children.

At the same time, all victim-survivors, including children, should be guaranteed legal support and be connected to the therapeutic supports they need to recover and rebuild.

Women's Legal Services Australia also welcomes the report's focus on sexual violence. Regardless of the context in which sexual violence occurs, victim-survivors must be able to access the specialist support they need to assert their rights, to seek justice and to heal. Long term funding for gender-specialist legal services is critical.

Ending violence against women and children is achievable. But it requires the Second Action Plan to be honest about where systems are failing, ambitious about reform, and unwavering in making sure help is there when women reach for it.

That is why we are calling for the second action plan to recognise specialist legal services, like women's legal services, as core infrastructure for safety and justice.