

Media release

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WOMEN'S LEGAL SERVICES COERCIVE CONTROL REPORT DEMONSTRATES NEED FOR URGENT TRAINING

Women's Legal Services in Queensland are calling for all lawyers to receive urgent training, especially to understand domestic and family violence and identifying coercive control following new research report findings.

The research project, undertaken in partnership with Women's Legal Services in Queensland (WLSQ) and North Queensland Women's Legal Service (NQWLS), interviewed women who had experienced coercive control. The consistent themes were feeling stress and pressure and living in a state of high alert, with many engaging in exhausting protective behaviours – to protect themselves and/or their children – from the moment of waking.

The research report 'Understanding and Responding to Coercive Control' was finalised days after the Women's Safety Taskforce report 'Hear Her Voice'. It emphasises that lawyers and other first responders need to get better at 'asking the right questions of survivors and recognising coercive control in the stories of women's experiences when we are taking instructions.'

The research findings reinforce the importance of all aspects of the legal profession knowing about coercive control, and provide recommendations for further consultation, testing, content, and methods for training. These findings were also identified in the 'Hear Her Voice' McMurdo Report, which recommends legal practitioners and judicial officers improve their response to domestic and family violence.

Julie Sarkozi, a spokesperson from WLSQ, said: "This research shows asking questions like: "How do you feel when he comes home? What is the first thing you think of when you get up in the morning? Are you happy to see him?" are better questions to help identify if someone is experiencing 'coercive control', instead of "Has he hit you?"

Ms. Sarkozi went on to say "We heard stories of constant abuse, belittling and degradation, gaslighting, threats, sleep deprivation, monitoring, and stalking, technological abuse and surveillance, jealousy and accusations of cheating, isolating women from their friends, family, and community, withholding and controlling finances, constant monitoring of social media and phones. When this behaviour occurs, lawyers need to better recognise and support women in danger."

NQWLS Director, Anne Lewis, said "This report recommends that lawyers get urgent training in recognising the signs of coercive control, methods of sensitive trauma-informed and culturally safe inquiry, responding and referring clients appropriately, and technical skills in acting on a disclosure of coercive control by providing appropriate legal advice and assistance."

Community Legal Centres Queensland, the peak body for the state's community legal centres, said the sector needs ample resourcing to train lawyers. Director Rosslyn Monro said: "Now the Women's Safety

Taskforce has recommended criminalising coercive control in Queensland, we need to be ahead of the game when this new legislation is introduced. Our lawyers need to be experts in coercive control but the sector needs to be adequately resourced to provide robust training in this area of law.”

We look forward to working with the Women's Safety Taskforce to achieve the recommendations to improve the training for law students, the legal profession, and the judiciary.

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