



PRO BONO

Access to Justice – Standing with Women Beyond Women's Month

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As Women's Month draws to an end, it is worth reflecting on the measures society has taken to protect women and other vulnerable groups against gender-based violence ("GBV"). It goes without saying that combating GBV cannot only be the responsibility of government. Every sector, including the legal profession, has a role to play.

One of the ways in which Werksmans Attorneys has contributed towards the fight against GBV is by the establishment of the Diepsloot Law Clinic ("**Clinic**"), which opened its doors to the public in 2012 and has been operational ever since. Operating every Tuesday and Thursday, the Clinic has become a lifeline for many women and families in the community, offering not just legal advice but a sense of safety, dignity, and hope.

Serving the Most Vulnerable

The Clinic primarily assists the most vulnerable members of society which includes women, (many of whom are unemployed or single mothers) as well as elderly clients facing complex family and financial pressures. The cases we encounter reflect both the resilience of our clients and the urgent need for access to justice for the less fortunate.

Some of the most common challenges faced by clients who visit the law clinic include:

- **Fraudulent marriages:** There are women who have discovered that they are fraudulently married to strangers (commonly foreign nationals). This has devastating consequences for their personal and financial rights.
- **Identity theft:** Many victims have discovered that their personal information has been used by criminals to fraudulently obtain identity documents at the Department of Home Affairs ("Department"). As a result, their names have been flagged by the Department for fraud leaving them unable to secure valid identity documents, which prevents them from finding decent employment, registering the births of their children, applying for social grants, or accessing government housing and other social services.
- **Child maintenance disputes:** In most instances, these cases affect single mothers who approach the Clinic for assistance in applying for Maintenance Orders against absent fathers who refuse to contribute towards the upbringing of their children.
- **Elderly clients seeking assistance:** Older community members frequently consult with us for advice on the execution of wills. We also assist grandparents who take on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren by either helping them with applications for foster care grants or by addressing cases where child grants are misused by their adult children, leaving grandparents without any financial resources to care for their grandchildren.
- **Elder abuse and neglect:** Many elderly clients suffer mistreatment at the hands of their relatives. In such cases, the Clinic provides assistance with protection orders to ensure that their safety and dignity is restored.
- **Domestic violence:** We often advise and assist women who experience various forms of domestic violence (such as physical, sexual, verbal, psychological, emotional and economic abuse).

Empowering Communities Through Justice

The cases we are often presented with go beyond legal technicalities, they affect the ability of women and families to live with dignity, safety and stability. By providing pro bono legal assistance, the Diepsloot Law Clinic empowers women to enforce their rights and protect their children and families. The ripple effect is profound in that when women are supported, the entire community becomes stronger.

Conclusion

Women's Month is a time to celebrate progress, but also to acknowledge the work that still needs to be done. Access to justice remains one of the most powerful tools for women empowerment. At Werksmans Attorneys, we believe that the law must serve everyone, not only those who can afford it. Through the Diepsloot Law Clinic and our broader pro bono initiatives, we are committed to standing with women, in Diepsloot and beyond, to ensure that their voices are heard, and their rights are protected.



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