

in their names, and many are able to simply hide some of their assets and income off the books — it doesn't show up."

Alternatives to Domestic Violence (ADV) in Hackensack has an attorney panel to represent clients concerning restraining orders but, when it comes to lengthy custody cases, it is extremely difficult to find a lawyer, Meyerson said.

Lilly Berton Rocco, a family law attorney in Hackensack, handles many cases for ADV and said that "Once you're talking about domestic violence and custody, these women and children are being victimized all over again.

"A lot of the time, due to lack of funds, they can't defend against a custody fight by the batterer," she added. "He is still living in the marital home, and she may be living in a shelter or with her family. But she shouldn't lose custody on those grounds."

Ramos also used the rally to criticize family court judges, who she claimed are insensitive to the claims and fears of abused women and their families. She cited such cautionary examples as the Teaneck case of Avi Kostner, a father who abused his son on weekend visits as his former wife unsuccessfully waged a seven-year legal battle for supervised visitation. Kostner killed his son Eitan, 10, and daughter, Geri Beth, 12, in 1994 on a weekend visit just days before they were to move to Florida with their mother.

Ramos said she invited judges, state legislators and Governor Corzine to attend the march, but they did not show.

E-mail: david@advnj.com

Women: Seek justice

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system that discounted their claims and was weighed against their efforts to keep their children.

One woman from New York City said she was there with other battered women "because this is happening everywhere and we need to be united."

Ramos, of Ringwood, founded Shelter Our Sisters in Teaneck, the first shelter for battered women on the East Coast, and is also founder and executive director of Strengthen Our Sisters, another shelter she started in West Milford.

Her contention about a shortage of counsel for battered women was borne out by other advocates and figures in the legal field.

"We have to turn away a number of women who come to us for help because we don't have the resources to represent everyone who contacts us," said John Fitzgerald, executive director of Northeast New Jersey Legal Services, which serves Passaic, Bergen and Hudson counties. He said that last year, the agency handled 533 custody cases in all three counties and that "We're turning away four out of five low-income people who come to us because we don't have the staff."

Custody cases, officials agree, are complicated, often require professional testimony from psychologists and are long and costly.

"Women are at a real disadvantage if they come to court without an attorney," Fitzgerald said. "And women are more likely to go unrepresented in court because generally the man has the job and the resources to hire an attorney."

Elaine Meyerson, executive director of Shelter Our Sisters in Teaneck, said her shelter has a few attorneys who offer pro bono — free, volunteer — work, "but not on an ongoing basis ... maybe a case or two a year. Some will offer clients services at a very low fee."

But, she said, even the appeal process is costly. "Women face a