Pornography and young people
Lessons from Luke Batty’s inquest
Survivor-led ethics in multi-agency work
Technology-facilitated abuse
Family violence in rural & regional areas
The abuse or neglect of family pets is common in the context of family violence. But until we get better at recognising the role of family pets women’s attachment to their animals will continue to be a barrier to them accessing safety.

I once worked with a woman who told me that her husband used to restrain the family cat and then physically assault it in front of her and the children. He would then turn to them and coldly state, ‘You’re next’.

I often tell this story when I’m delivering training, and inevitably everyone winces and recoils. It’s too distressing to thin that animals are sometimes victims of family violence too.

I have spoken to many women who have shared stories of animal abuse or neglect. In Victoria, when conducting a family violence risk assessment, workers ask women if their partner has ever harmed, or threatened to harm, their pet. Sometimes, women will say, ‘Well, not exactly, but he did tie my elderly dog outside on a hot day with no water’ or ‘Not exactly, but he locks the cat in the laundry when I’m not home’ or ‘Not exactly, but when my dog was sick he wouldn’t give me money to take her to the vet’.

Animal abuse in the context of family violence is not always easy to identify. However, animal abuse is a high-risk indicator, and may increase the likelihood of the woman being seriously injured or killed. In addition, perpetrators who abuse animals are five times more likely to physically or sexually assault their partners.

Pet abuse and the law
In Victoria, pet abuse is a criminal offence under the Family Violence Protection Act (2008), which states that it is a crime to ‘cause or threaten to cause the death of, or injury to, an animal whether or not the animal belongs to the family member to whom the behaviour is directed, so as to control, dominate or coerce the family member’.

Dr Deborah Walsh from the University of Queensland has been researching intimate partner violence and companion animal welfare for some time. She told me this story:

A woman I supported told me that she was once given a puppy for Christmas from her partner. She loved the puppy and quickly became bonded with him. Her partner then tied her down and forced her to watch him kill the puppy. Soon after, her partner bought her another puppy. In her grief, she reattached herself to the animal and once again became bonded. Again, her partner tied her up and forced her to watch while he...
prevented them from leaving a violent relationship sooner. The decision to flee an unsafe home is often impeded by the fact that a woman almost certainly cannot take her companion animal with her. Many women will delay leaving out of fear that their animal will be distressed, harmed or neglected in their absence.

Unfortunately, there is only one refuge in Australia (NSW) that can co-locate women and animals. While there are council or community programs that will house some animals for a short period of time, the family and their pets will still have to separate. Dr Walsh says, ‘It is dreadful to expect women and children to be separated from their animals at a time of crisis’. Indeed, their research concluded that ‘housing both women and pets together after the common experience of abuse would enable the emotional bond and a semblance of routine to be maintained during a time of stress’.

The American organisation Sheltering Animals & Families Together (SAF-T) provides a step-by-step guide for women’s refuges to co-locate families with their companion animals. One staff member reflects:

“The shelter has made a world of difference. I have heard from so many women that they were finally able to leave because they didn’t have to leave their ‘baby’ behind. The interaction we see with ... their pets is amazing and it seems to be so healing for them to have their

Abusers will target the animal to which the woman or her children have the greatest emotional connection ...
What can be done to protect companion animals

1. Given that companion animals are a part of families, and can be a huge barrier to leaving abusive relationships, family violence practitioners should advocate for funding and explore partnerships to support the co-location of women, children and their companion animals, after separation.

2. Councils should develop family violence protocols for local laws officers and train them in identifying family violence.

3. Vets should be resourced with posters about the prevalence of family violence and provide information about how to get help. In addition vets could consider promoting reduced fees or payment plans for victims of family violence to mitigate the ongoing risk to animals.

The Victorian situation

Local governments in Victoria are starting to use their animal management practices to address the issue of animal abuse in the context of family violence. In 2012, local laws officers in an outer Melbourne suburb attended a property to remove two dogs after receiving complaints. The pregnant partner of the owner pleaded with the officers not to take the animals, saying that her partner would be angry to see the dogs gone, and would blame her and may become violent. Not being aware of their options, the officers seized the dogs. That night, the woman was assaulted so badly that she was hospitalised and lost her baby.

Realising that this assault was preventable, the council took action. They reviewed their animal management practices and local laws officers were offered support and training on how to identify and respond to family violence. Since then, more than 200 local laws officers have received training through the Municipal Association of Victoria, including at Macedon Ranges, Ararat, Bendigo, Latrobe, Wellington, Yarriambiack, Darebin and Moreland. At Women’s Health in the North, we provide training to local laws officials, and participants consistently report that they welcome any information that will support them in their work with animals and families.

Vets can also play a key role in identifying and responding to family violence. With training, vets can identify injuries and fractures that have been inflicted by abuse. Dr LJ Tong at the University of NSW has developed an index to assess non-accidental injury in animals. Dr Tong states:

Making a correct diagnosis could be crucial to the health and welfare of not only the animal concerned, but also all other vulnerable people and animals in the household.

Despite this, it is important to recognise that animals who experience family violence tend to have a lower standard of veterinary care. One reason for this may be financial abuse, which can result in the animal receiving ineffective treatment at home.

People in crisis clearly benefit from the presence of their companion animals. The family violence sector needs to recognise and accommodate this reality, and move towards a support environment that acknowledges, honours and accounts for the role of animals in family violence. We need to support all members of the family, including pets, otherwise women’s attachment to their animals will continue to be a barrier to them accessing safety.

Further information

For more information about training for local laws officers in identifying and responding to family violence, contact Kellie Nagle at Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV): 03 9667 5585 or knagle@mav.asn.au

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