

*“Animals have their own experience of family violence”*

By Ada Conroy, Family Violence Project Worker and Trainer, Women’s Health In the North

I once worked with a woman who told me that her husband harmed the family cat in front of her and the children and then turned to them and coldly stated: ‘you’re next’.

I often tell this story when I’m delivering training, and inevitably everyone winces and recoils. It’s too much for us to imagine, and too distressing to think about. We love animals and we don’t want to know that they are sometimes victims of family violence. But they are.

I have spoken to many women who have shared stories of animal abuse or neglect. In Victoria, when conducting a family violence risk assessment, we 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 ‘well, not exactly, but he won’t let my cat sleep on our bed’ 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 determine. However, animal abuse in the context of family violence 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 5 times more likely to physically and/or sexually assault their partners<sup>1</sup>.

In Victoria, pet abuse is a criminal offence under the *Family Violence Protection Act (2008)*, which states that ‘causing or threatening 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’.

I recently spoke with Dr. Deborah Walsh from the University of Queensland. She 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. And again, her partner tied her up and forced her to watch while he killed this animal too. And then a third animal arrived. And she didn’t bond. She didn’t become attached. And the animal lived a long life.’*

Importantly, the animal that is targeted will always be the animal to whom she or the children have the greatest emotional connection. Regardless of ownership, and regardless of how many other animals are in the home, if the woman is emotionally bonded to the animal, that animal will be the target. Essentially, **her attachment to the animal is the risk factor.**

But animals have their own experience of family violence. In Tiplady and Walsh’s 2012<sup>2</sup> research, they found that behavioural changes were reported in 85% of the survey respondents’ animals. Most respondents reported that the changes were significant and long term, lasting longer than the experience of family violence overall. Some of the impacts on the animals were fear of men and anxiety, both, in some cases, persisting for the rest of the animal’s life. As a result, the animals had a

<sup>1</sup> Volant, A.M. et.al. (2008) “The Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse”. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 23:9. p12.

<sup>2</sup> Tiplady C.M., Walsh D.B. and Philips C.J.C. (2012) “Intimate partner violence and companion animal welfare”. *Australian Veterinary Journal* 90: 1-2. p48.

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harder time integrating into a foster home, animal shelter or boarding kennel. Their study found that the animals who experienced anxiety as a result of the family violence, suffered increased symptoms if they were then separated from their family.

It stands to reason, then, that the decision to flee an unsafe home would be impeded by the fact that a woman almost certainly can’t take her animal with her. Many women will delay leaving out of fear that her animal will be distressed, harmed or neglected in her absence.

Unfortunately, there are currently no refuges in Australia that will co-locate women and animals, and whilst there are council or community programs that will house some animals for a short period of time, it doesn’t solve the problem that the family and their companion animal will have to separate. Walsh stated that ‘it is dreadful to expect women and children be separated from their animals at a time of crisis’.



In America, there is an organisation called “Sheltering Animals & Families Together” or “SAF-T<sup>3</sup>” for short. This organisation provides a step-by-step guide for women’s refuges to co-locate families with their companion animals. One staff member reflected: “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 furry family members with them. I have heard from them also that they see a difference in their pet being here in comparison to the way they were at home with the abuser.” It would be such a comfort to women to not just to know that their pets are safe, but to be able to be with and hold their pets after a shared traumatic experience.

Local government in Victoria is 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, whom they had received complaints about. The partner of the owner of the dogs - a pregnant woman - pleaded with the officers not to take the animals, saying her partner would be angry to see the dogs gone when he returned home, that he would blame her and may become violent. Given that they were there, and not being aware of their options, the officers took the dogs. That night, she was assaulted so badly that she was hospitalised and lost her pregnancy. Knowing 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 in identifying family violence, including at Macedon Ranges, Ararat, Bendigo, Latrobe, Wellington, Yarriambiack, Darebin and Moreland (Municipal Association of Victoria , 2015).

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. L.J Tong at the University of

<sup>3</sup> <http://alliephillips.com/saf-tprogram/> accessed 2/02/2015

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NSW has developed an index to assess non-accidental injury in animals. Dr. Tong states that ‘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’<sup>4</sup>. Animals who experience family violence tend to have a lower standard of veterinary care. One reason for this may be financial abuse,<sup>5</sup> which can result in the animal receiving treatment at home.

My three recommendations for change:

1. Given that companion animals are a part of our families, and are a huge barrier to leaving abusive relationships; let’s work towards co-location of women, kids and their companion animals, post-separation. Tiplady’s research found 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’.
2. Councils can develop family violence response in local laws officer protocols, and local law officers can be trained in identifying family violence. For more information, contact Kelly Nagle at Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV): (03) 9667 5585 or [REDACTED]
3. As well as training, vets could consider displaying posters that highlight the prevalence of family violence and provide information about how to get help. Promotion of reduced fees or payment plans for victims of family violence could mitigate the ongoing risk to animals.

We understand that people in crisis benefit from the presence of their companion animal. And, as a society, we are appalled by companion animal abuse. This is evidenced by the many people who cannot bear to imagine family pets as victims of family violence. But until we face it, women’s attachment to their animals will continue to be a barrier to them accessing safety.

It’s time we created safe spaces for families of all shapes and sizes. As Walsh said, this is no small ask, but we do need to move towards a support environment where we acknowledge, honour and account for the animal/human bond. We need a more humane way to support all members of the family<sup>6</sup>. This means including pets in all our family violence interventions.

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<sup>4</sup> L.J. Tong, (2013) “Fracture characteristics to distinguish between accidental injury and non-accidental injury in dogs” *The Veterinary Journal* 199 (2014) 392 - 398

<sup>5</sup> Tiplady C.M., Walsh D.B. and Philips C.J.C. (2012) “Intimate partner violence and companion animal welfare”. *Australian Veterinary Journal* 90: 1-2. p48.

<sup>6</sup> With thanks to Dr. Deborah Walsh for her time and expertise.