

Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

Introduction

It is a fundamental assumption of our submission that in regard to victims of family violence, the category 'family' should be extended to include companion animals.

We believe, based on academic literature, media reports and our own work in providing crisis foster care for the animal victims of family violence, that a rounded appraisal of physical, verbal, economic and sexual violence against women and children must also include the animals trapped in this cycle-if for no other reason than that they are frequently the companion animals of human victims who, in the desperation to leave a threatening situation, are forced to leave them behind with the perpetrator.

As an academic researching and teaching within a feminist framework, and the campaign director of animal advocacy group Animal Active Australia Inc (a member group of Animals Australia), I have been involved in defending animals against neglect, exploitation and abuse in domestic and community contexts for a quarter of a century. In both my academic and animal advocacy work I straddle two distinct but related areas of concern regarding male violence and its impact on women, children, non-human animals and ultimately, the whole community.

The following comments attempt to briefly address this issue and locate its significance within the overall concerns of the Royal Commission.

Submission

In supporting humane education as a tool to break the cycle of violence, the RSPCA acknowledged a clear link between violence against animals and consequent social violence. Following a national humane education conference hosted by RSPCA NSW in 2005 the following statement appeared on its website:

Animal abuse does not happen in isolation but is part of a much bigger problem of violence in society. Research suggests there is a link between animal abuse, domestic violence, child abuse and aggressive anti-social behaviour. It is an ongoing cycle of violence that needs to be stopped. Teaching empathy for animals to children has shown an increase in empathy for humans in the same children. This may be a way of breaking cycles of family violence.ⁱ

It is a link that is well understood by international agencies and identified by programs such as the “First Strike” campaign of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). “First Strike” involves practitioners from various professional fields, such as teachers, psychologists, social workers, animal welfare workers, police and other enforcement officers, working together to apply intervention strategies in relation to family and animal violence on the understanding that one can be the precursor and indicator of the other.

We read on the HSUS website that:

*Each year, the First Strike campaign works with hundreds of local advocates around the United States to organize workshops in their communities. The central theme of these workshops is that animal cruelty is a highly visible form of family and community violence...Through these workshops, we hope to provide the support and foundation necessary for the development of interagency collaborations that enable early identification and intervention in cases of animal cruelty and human violence.*ⁱⁱ

The link between animal abuse, child abuse and family violence has also been academically pursuedⁱⁱⁱ galvanizing debate and producing literature around the key themes that provide impetus to the Royal Commission. Contributors to this collection, which abounds with case studies and empirical evidence, include Carol Adams^{iv} and psychologist Professor Frank Ascione^v; contributions are linked by the “hope that by highlighting the connections between cruelty to animals and interpersonal violence, the potential for violence in all its forms will be reduced”.^{vi}

It is now widely accepted that animals in the community, in particular companion animals, are subject to all forms of family violence, including sexual abuse.

Illustrative cases

On a global scale I refer to the staggering number of cases cited on www.pet-abuse.com, an online animal abuse database. It is obvious from the number of cases detailed on this site, thousands of examples of animal abuse where charges have been laid under differing jurisdictions, that sometimes animal sexual abuse is confined to a range of violent activities targeting the animal victim directly; in many instances, however, abuse of an animal can serve as a proxy to coerce, threaten or in some other way express brutal power over a woman or child. There are for example recurring cases where a woman is forced to have sex with a violent partner’s dog, both being thus subject to his power, or to watch as an animal she cares about is violated, tortured or killed.

On the other hand there are a numerous examples of the “loner” animal sexual abuser such as Sydney financier Brendan Francis McMahon whose case gained national notoriety in 2005:

Accused of bestiality with rabbits and their mutilation deaths, the 36-year-old New Zealand-born businessman found himself in the glare and flashes of television and newspaper cameras when he left Sydney's Downing Centre Local Court...In addition to the bestiality charges, he is charged with 18 counts of aggravated cruelty to 18 rabbits whose mutilated and partially skinned

carcasses, many with their skulls crushed and ears cut off, were found throughout the Sydney CBD over a six-week period in July and August.^{vii}

There is a strong urge to deny that such bizarre forms of violence can take place in our family contexts or within the comfort zone of our communities.

However as clearly supported by the examples on www.pet-abuse.com and the case of Brendan McMahon, an otherwise normal, professional male, sexual abuse of animals crosses demographic boundaries and, as with domestic and sexual violence against women, children and other vulnerable humans, is most frequently perpetrated by those the victim has reason to trust.

Nor is there necessarily a strict boundary between the abuse of human and animal victims. Two recent examples are provided in the case of Tasmanian Bruce Paton Anderson found guilty of possessing pornographic material featuring child and animal sexual abuse^{viii}, and that of New South Wales resident Nigel Keith Saddler who was sentenced for possessing thousands of child pornography and animal sex abuse images. In the words of the sentencing judge in Saddler's case the 35,000 images were of "the most disturbing and depraved kind", including the torture and abuse of babies and bestiality.^{ix}

There is certainly a need for more current local research accessing RSPCA and police files, and gathering oral histories from human survivors of domestic and sexual abuse, in order to document the frequency and nature of animal sexual and physical abuse within our community and its relationship to the abuse of women, children and other forms of family violence. However that it exists within the spectrum of abusive behavior that we term 'family violence' is amply supported by anecdotal evidence and literature deriving from police and media reports, as well as academic research.

It is an alarming trend that the perpetration of violence against animals, in particular sexual violence, is mainstreaming in acceptability to the extent that it has been used for laughs on our radio airwaves without serious repercussions. For example a Melbourne resident sent a complaint letter to radio station Nova 100 in response to a cart aired asking listeners if they were "after some furry love?", directing them to "0055PETS", followed by a male voice sighing "ohhh Xena/Fluffy" etc, as if erotically engaging with a companion animal. The alarmed listener protested to the station as follows, forwarding a copy of her letter to our organization :

"Although I love your station and am a dedicated listener (with a great sense of humour for most of your content) bestiality is an extremely serious case of animal cruelty, and a criminal offence, which is too grave a matter to be treated as stimulus for laughter. I do not think a similar cart which involved a joke with the suggestion of the sexual abuse of children would be aired without community outrage. Animals deserve as much respect, and bestiality is as severe a crime. Although I am fully aware that this cart has been produced in jest, in the light of recent cases such as Brendan Francis McMahon, the NSW company director who was arrested for the horrific sexual assault and mutilation of countless rabbits and guinea pigs, the sexual abuse of animals is an atrocious reality and no laughing matter."^x

Nor can we ignore the proliferation of animal sexual abuse in cyberspace. Easily accessible pornography sites with banners such as [REDACTED] blend misogynistic content with the sexual abuse of animals as a promotional element in the product line being touted.

Conclusion

By means of exemplifying a selection of cases our submission supports the view that at the hub of all violence is abuse of power ; violence, thus, results from a perpetrator's behavioural choices and not from any defining characteristic of the victim.

Non-human animals share with women, children, the disabled, the elderly and so forth, a vulnerability within the systemic power relations that define our culture; they too must be guaranteed a community in which they are enabled to enjoy lives free from violence or the fear of violence. Above it is consistent with Australian cultural understandings that a family is comprised of both its human and non-human animals and the relationships that exist in this blend are valuable to the wellbeing of all.

We hope that the Royal Commission will consider the points we have raised and give requisite attention to our submission.

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Endnotes

ⁱ http://www.rspcansw.org.au/what_we_do/humane_education

ⁱⁱ http://www.hsus.org/acf/cruelty/publiced/first_strike_workshops/organizing_a_first_strike_workshop_in_your_community.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Lockwood R. and Ascione F. R. (eds) *Cruelty to Animals and Interpersonal Violence: Readings in Research and Application* Purdue Research Foundation USA 1998

^{iv} Adams, Carol J. (1994), “*Bringing Peace Home: A Feminist Philosophical Perspective on the Abuse of Women, Children and Pet Animals*” in Lockwood & Ascione (1998) pp 318-339

^v Ascione, F. R. (1998) “Battered Women’s Reports of Their Partners’ and their Children’s’ Cruelty to Animals” in Lockwood & Ascione (1998) pp 290-304

^{vii} Ascione, F. R. (1998) Page 2

^{viii} “Financier in Court on bestiality and cruelty charges” The Age October 13 2005

^{ix} <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-04-15/man-admits-child-porn-bestiality-charges/2615128>

^x <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/sick-images-spark-child-porn-law-call/story-e6frg6n6-111116124520>

^{xi} From archives of Animal Active Australia Inc

