

Domestic Violence: The Impact on Pets

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It has been a widely publicised and well-documented matter that domestic violence is an ongoing and longstanding issue. Recent proposals to make domestic abuse a free-standing criminal offence independent of any other violent offence have been greeted with a positive response.¹

In March 2013 the definition of domestic abuse was broadened to include financial and emotional abuse as well as matters of a physical and sexual nature.² Most recently, the shadow home secretary, Yvette Cooper announced a £3 million fund for domestic violence victims at the

Labour Party Conference on 24 September.³

The trauma felt by spouses, partners and children suffering or fleeing domestic abuse is recognised by many as intolerable and unacceptable. But the plight felt by domestic pets is all too often overlooked. The manner in which a pet is used and abused by the perpetrator is not often forgotten by those who have witnessed this type of exploitation. Recently the case of Amie Smith hit the headlines who pleaded guilty, earlier this year to animal neglect as a result of starving her two-year old Bull Terrier, Rocky to death. Smith claimed she had failed to return for the dog as a result of an abusive relationship.⁴ Whilst in the US Ryan Eddy Watenpaugh was arrested for alleged animal cruelty after claiming to have cooked his partner's pet Pomeranian and serving it to her as an act of revenge.⁵

A means to manipulation
The Dog's Trust welfare charity released posed pictures earlier this summer in an attempt to highlight the link between domestic abuse and the

sufferer's household pets. In one picture a Great Dane stands with its leg wrapped in blue plaster, captioned '...I fell down the stairs'. Whilst another shows a Bull Terrier with a black eye, peering from behind a kitchen cabinet door, captioned 'I hit my head on the cupboard'. This also highlights the behaviour of victims when attempting to disguise the perpetrator's brutality.⁶

The perpetrator either physically abuses the animal or threatens to do so as a manner of manipulating the victim⁷ – this tactic commonly being seen in cases involving children.

Some victims of domestic violence have reported remaining with their partners for fear of harm to their pet or as a result of harm the perpetrator has inflicted on them in the past.⁸ In one study, 70.3% of women fleeing domestic violence reported threats to or actual harm being inflicted upon their pet, with 54% of women reporting actual harm.⁹

So when fleeing domestic abuse, what are the options when it comes to a

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¹ Mason, Rowena, 'David Cameron vows to consider creating domestic violence offence', *The Guardian*, 25 July 2014

² Ghai, Mandip, 'Domestic Violence update – what a practitioner needs to know', *Family Law Week*, 11 September 2014

³ Cohen, Claire, 'Labour to announce £3m fund for domestic violence victims', *The Telegraph*, 24 September 2014

⁴ Flint, Hannah, 'Walker dog owner left her bull terrier to starve to death in an act of cruelty deemed the worst in 30 years', *www.chroniclelive.co.uk*, 24 September 2014

⁵ Dearden, Lizzie, 'Man 'who killed girlfriend's dog and fed it to her' is arrested in US', *The Independent*, 13 September 2014

⁶ Winter, Stuart, 'Animal abuse is first sign of domestic abuse risk', *The Express*, 13 July 2014

⁷ Bartlett, Nicola, 'Pets manipulated by abusers in Wales warn RSPCA', *www.walesonline.co.uk*, 28 September 2014.

⁸ As advised by Refuge at <http://www.refuge.org.uk/get-help-now/what-about-pets/>

⁹ Animal Cruelty/Domestic Violence: The link', as per <http://www.peteducation.com/article.cfm?e=2+2100&aid=3120>

beloved pet? Many refuges provide shelter for women and children fleeing violence but many are unable to provide the same for their pets.¹⁰

Planning ahead

Fortunately, the issue of domestic abuse affecting family pets is being acknowledged as an increasing one and some websites are offering advice to owners when assessing their options. The Animal Welfare Institute in Washington DC provides advice for considering pets when remaining with or fleeing from the perpetrators of domestic violence.¹¹ Upon advising those choosing to remain with their partners; victims are advised to ensure that they have a hidden, emergency provision of food for their pet to provide if their partner withholds money from them. Documentation to prove ownership of the animal, such as vet bills, should also be secured. Those planning on leaving with their pet are advised to change all vet's details and to take belongings familiar to the animal such as their favourite toy or bedding to ensure their transition to new surroundings will be as easy as possible. For those who have already left the perpetrator taking their pet

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with them, they are advised to keep the pet indoors, especially if their new address is known to the perpetrator and not to walk their pets alone on unfamiliar routes.

PetRetreat, the Freedom Project and Paws for Kids

As a result of many victims of domestic abuse being unable to take their pets with them to refuges or shelters, the RSPCA established PetRetreat which provides a temporary fostering service for pets belonging to sufferers of domestic abuse. Since 2002 it has helped 1200 animals belonging to 800 families fleeing such violence.¹² Whilst the Dog's Trust founded the Freedom Project and the charity, Paws for Kids, based in the North West also provide similar fostering services for household pets.

A survey conducted by the Pet Owners Association has reported that 94% of victims of domestic abuse would have left the perpetrator earlier had they known of a pet fostering service, therefore saving them from further abuse.¹³

Studies have found animal abuse is directly associated to an increased risk of harm to children within the same household.¹⁴ With Clare Kivieha, Manager of the Freedom Project stating that 'animal abuse can be the first visible sign that a family is living with the threat of domestic violence.'¹⁵ Whilst, the reverse can also be said, in that those reported or convicted of domestic abuse may also have tendencies to demonstrate the same behaviour towards animals. A reported example of this being

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Matthew Hawksworth who was convicted of animal cruelty after being found to have inflicted broken bones and bruises to his Staffordshire Bull Terrier puppy in September this year. Hawksworth's previous convictions included matters involving both harassment and domestic violence.¹⁶

In a proactive and pragmatic move towards tackling the issue, vets are being recruited and trained in Scotland to spot the signs of the domestic abuse in their animal patients.¹⁷ Scottish vets are being advised on how to manage owners of animals brought in with 'unlikely stories', similarly to the manner in which pharmacists are trained to assist women suspected of being victims of rape or sexual abuse seeking contraceptives or painkillers. The Domestic Abuse Veterinary Institute developed by Scottish charity, Medics Against Violence will assist in training vets in encouraging suspected victims of domestic abuse to report matters to the police or refer them on to organisations who will be able to support them further.

Tragically, as with most issues concerning animal welfare the stories of the victims frequently go untold. Hopefully with these services in place to temporarily house pets it will enable sufferers of domestic abuse to alleviate their fears sooner rather than later.

¹⁰Commentary by the International Fund for Animal Welfare at <http://www.ifaw.org/uk/united-kingdom/our-work/cats-and-dogs/united-kingdom-protecting-pets-domestic-violence>

¹¹'Safety Planning for Pets of Domestic Violence Victims', as advised by the Animal Welfare Institute at <https://awionline.org/content/safety-planning-pets-domestic-violence-victims>

¹²<http://www.rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/petretreat>

¹³'Pets caught up in domestic violence', commentary at http://www.pet-owners.co.uk/index.php/articles/detail/pet_link_appeals_for_help

¹⁴ibid 11

¹⁵ibid 6

¹⁶Mathews, Jane, 'Thug who BIT and punched puppy escapes jail', *The Express*, 1 September 2014

¹⁷'Vets are recruited in fight against domestic violence in Scotland', *The Daily Record*, 20 April 2013