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*W*omen and their fur-babies:
leaving family violence together



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F or my mum

Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

– Albert Einstein (1972, cited in Ascione & Arkow, 1999)



Abstract

The use of animal abuse as a coercive control technique within intimate partner violence is found in nearly half of all violent relationships. Concern for their animals' well-being, fear for their own safety and difficulty finding temporary animal accommodation leads to women remaining in these relationships. Te Whare Tiaki Wahine Refuge is the only women's refuge in New Zealand that makes formal provision for animals at their safe houses, enabling women and animals to leave violence together. This research explores the relationship women have with their animals within the context of intimate partner violence, positions animals as victims of family violence themselves, and asks why the service Te Whare Tiaki Wahine Refuge offers is important in enabling women and their animals to leave family violence together. Three women who had animals and were residing at Te Whare Tiaki Wahine Refuge, two Te Whare Tiaki Wahine Refuge social workers and four Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals staff volunteered to participate in conversational interviews that were focused on women's relationships with their animals and experiences of animal abuse and intimate partner violence. The provision of accommodation for animals leaving violence was investigated. The interviews were voice-recorded, transcribed and analysed using feminist standpoint epistemology and Riessman's (1993) method of narrative inquiry. The analysis represents the strength of women's relationships with their animals and the importance of them being able to leave their violent relationships together. Animals were positioned as victims of family violence within this research, resulting from the animals' experiences of physical abuse, purposeful neglect and emotional suffering. Women were found to generally position their animals to be part of the family and an important source of comfort, unconditional love and companionship, especially during difficult times. Having these animals at the safe house with them meant that the women were able to settle in to the safe house better and focus on moving forward with their lives, rather than worrying about their animal's safety or grieve the loss of, or temporary separation from, their relationship with their animal. This research has highlighted the need for systematic changes to the way

we understand family violence and how we view animals within our society, and the need for the development and implementation of programs, like Tiaki have, that enable women, children and animals to leave violence together.

Keywords: intimate partner violence, animal abuse, domestic violence, family violence, feminism, Womens Refuge, Te Whare Tiaki Wahine Refuge, Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA)

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Abstract..... | 7 |
| Acknowledgements..... | 9 |
| Table of Contents..... | 11 |
| Introduction..... | 15 |
| Intimate Partner Violence and Animal Abuse..... | 17 |
| Intersectionality..... | 22 |
| Psychology, animals and intimate partner violence..... | 24 |
| What this Thesis Covers..... | 25 |
| Literature Review..... | 27 |
| Māori and Intimate Partner Violence..... | 28 |
| Women’s Refuge Movement and Parallel Development..... | 30 |
| Companion Animals and New Zealand Society..... | 32 |
| Intimate Partner Violence and Animal Abuse – the International Literature..... | 34 |
| Prevalence of animal abuse as part of intimate partner violence..... | 34 |
| Function of animal abuse in intimate partner violence..... | 36 |
| Companion animals and leaving intimate partner violence..... | 36 |
| Children, intimate partner violence and animal abuse..... | 38 |
| Animals as victims of intimate partner violence..... | 38 |
| Intimate Partner Violence and Animal Abuse – the New Zealand Context..... | 40 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Methodology | 45 |
| Standpoint Epistemology | 46 |
| A Narrative Approach | 47 |
| Narrative inquiry..... | 48 |
| Narrative analysis | 49 |
| Research aims | 51 |
| Method | 51 |
| Ethical considerations..... | 51 |
| Recruitment and participants | 54 |
| Interviews | 55 |
| Transcription..... | 57 |
| Analysis | 57 |
| Reflexivity | 59 |
| Analysis and discussion | 61 |
| Experiences of Animal Abuse..... | 62 |
| He kept beating the dog | 63 |
| Anything that hurts them, is going to hurt you..... | 67 |
| Wāhine | 69 |
| Like part of the family | 70 |
| Experiencing separation | 74 |
| The Refuge Service | 78 |
| Te Whare Tiaki Wāhine Refuge..... | 82 |
| There is no barrier to abuse | 82 |
| Safety | 86 |
| Wellbeing..... | 87 |
| Challenges | 90 |
| Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals | 93 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Understanding of the Link between Intimate Partner Violence and Animal Abuse | 94 |
| Challenges to helping women and animals | 98 |
| Finding a solution: we always try | 106 |
| Conclusions..... | 109 |
| References..... | 117 |
| Appendix A..... | 133 |
| Appendix B..... | 137 |
| Appendix C..... | 139 |
| Appendix D..... | 141 |

