

The background of the page is a solid green color. In the center, there are two overlapping silhouettes: a larger one of a dog (possibly a Weimaraner) and a smaller one of a cat, both facing right. The text is overlaid on the lower part of these silhouettes.

Companion animals in the fight against gender-based violence towards women and domestic violence

February 2022

Call for the inclusion of companion animals in the European Commission's upcoming proposal to combat gender-based violence against women and domestic violence.

Background

The EU has to date not introduced any legal instrument to tackle gender-based violence and more general domestic violence. Following a fitness check conducted to analyse how current EU legislation impact violence against women and domestic violence, the European Commission will introduce a legislative proposal to combat violence against women and domestic violence, in line with the [EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#).

Context

There is a clear correlation between domestic violence and violence against companion animals.

Companion animals are used to exercise control over the victim

Abusers can threaten to or harm the companion animal of the victim to exercise control and intimidate them.¹ These threats can aim to coerce the victim to stay or return, or punish the victim. 71% of pet owners in domestic violence shelters report that their abuser had threatened, caused harm to or killed their companion animals.² The animals can experience the same types of abuse as the spouse or children of the abuser, meaning physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse / threats, deliberate neglect and other psychological and mental abuse.³

Companion animals act as emotional support for victims

Victims are often isolated with no or limited social interaction. Companion animals offer comfort and consolation. This is especially important for children. Companion animals, especially dogs, are also very likely to defend the victim against the abuser. As victims leave their home, it is essential that they can benefit from the presence of their pet to ensure stability and emotional support. Victims may also not want to leave their home not

¹Cleary, C., Thapa, D. K., West, S., Westman, M., and Kornhaber, R. (2021); Animal Legal Defense Fund (2021). Animal Cruelty's Link to Other Forms of Violence. Available at: <https://aldf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Animal-Legal-Defense-Fund-Link-Factsheet.pdf>

²"Animal abuse in the context of adult intimate partner violence: A systematic review". Aggression and Violent Behavior 61, 101676, ISSN 1359-1789, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101676>.

³Ascione, F. R., Weber, C. V. and David S. Wood (1997). "The abuse of animals and domestic violence: a national survey of shelters for women who are battered". Society and Animals, 5(3).

⁴Tiplady, C.M., Walsh, D.B., and Phillips, C. (2018). "The animals are all I have", Society & Animals 26(5), 490-514. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685306-12341464>

to abandon their pet with the abuser and in fear of collateral damage to the animal. In the U.S., a survey concluded that 34% of the women delayed their departure because they feared leaving their pet with the abuser.⁴ In a study conducted in Ireland among 23 victims of domestic abuse living in a shelter, 87% reported that a facility to accommodate their companion animals would have facilitated their decision to leave.⁵ The abuser can also use the pet to force their partner who left the household to come back. This could lead to up to 25% of victims to return to their abuser.⁶ Acknowledging this situation, more than 100 programs have been put in place in the U.S. to help shelters coordinate with animal protection organisations so that the victims' animals can also find a shelter.⁷ While the data comes mostly from the U.S., it is undebatable that the abuse is a wide-spread crime that has no borders and tends to follow a pattern.

Animal abuse is an indicator of the situation and has important consequences

Animal abuse can be an indicator of the threats to the victim. The actions of an abuser towards a pet can be a sign of what harm may occur to the victim. If the abuser actually kills the animal, it may indicate that the abuser can inflict serious, and possibly fatal, harm on the victim. A study indicates that 41% of pet abusers have also been arrested for intimate partner violence.⁸ A victim may also more easily react in self-defence if they know that the abuser has the ability to cause harm similar to what was inflicted on their companion animal. This situation can also cause severe psychological problems for children as a study found that 32% of women in a shelter reported that their children had harmed animals.⁹

The cases of animal abuse recently exploded as 45% of relevant authorities in Spain have reported more cases of animal cruelty than before the pandemic.¹⁰ Acknowledging these elements, other parts of the world, such as Scotland¹¹ or the United States¹² already include animal abuse committed to intimidate or control people as a form of violent crime against them. In this context, Thirty-six U.S. states have enacted legal provisions to

⁴Hardesty, J.L., Khaw, L., Ridgway, M.D., Weber, C. and Miles, T. (2013). Coercive Control and Abused Women's Decisions About Their Pets When Seeking Shelter. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 28(13):2617-2639. doi:10.1177/0886260513487994.

⁵Gallagher, B., Allen, M. and Jones, B. (2008). "Animal abuse and intimate partner violence: researching the link and its significance in Ireland - a veterinary perspective". *Irish Veterinary Journal* 61, 658. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2046-0481-61-10-658>

⁶<https://www.asPCA.org/blog/domestic-violence-awareness-month-about-protecting-people-and-pets>

⁷ASPCA (30 October 2017). Domestic Violence Awareness Month Is About Protecting People and Pets. Available at: <https://awionline.org/content/safe-havens-mapping-project-pets-domestic-violence-victims#:~:text=Safe%20havens%20are%20sheltering%20services,help%20people%20find%20these%20facilities.>

⁸Levitt, L., Hoffer, T.A., Loper and A.B., (2016). "Criminal histories of a subsample of animal cruelty offenders". *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 30:48-58. ISSN 1359-1789, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.05.002>.

⁹Ascione, F.R. Weber, C.V. and Wood, D.S. (1997). "The abuse of animals and domestic violence: a national survey of shelters for women who are battered". *Society and Animals*, 5(3).

¹⁰Survey conducted by el Instituto de Políticas Públicas de Protección Animal (IPPPA), IPPPA (3 November 2020). Amplia cobertura mediática sobre el estudio del IPPPA revelando el aumento de maltrato animal durante la pandemia de coronavirus. Available at <https://www.ipppa.org/2020/11/03/amplia-cobertura-mediatica-sobre-el-estudio-del-ipppa-revelando-el-aumento-de-maltrato-animal-durante-la-pandemia-de-coronavirus/>

¹¹Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, Section 1(2)(a). The act defines coercive and abusive behaviour as being "likely to cause the person to suffer physical or psychological harm", that includes harming companion animals.

¹²Pet and Women Safety Act of 2017.

ensure that victims of domestic violence can include pets in restraining orders.¹³ Spain recently introduced legal requirements pertaining to companion animals in the context of domestic violence. The law provides that the custody of children can now be denied to a parent who has been charged for animal abuse.¹⁴

Eurogroup for Animals Position

Following the examples set by these countries quoted above, we are calling for the EU to include provisions related to companion animals to protect all victims of domestic violence, including women, children and animals.

The European Commission proposal should, in particular:

- Request the establishment of grants to accommodate victims of domestic violence and their companion animals, including equines, in appropriate shelters during the judicial process if they do not have a stable accommodation.
- Include companion animals as victims of domestic violence to be considered in restraining orders.
- Recognise the mistreatment of companion animals as an aggravating circumstance in cases of gender and domestic violence.
- Promote informative awareness campaigns on domestic violence that include companion animals.¹⁵
- Strengthen coordination and cooperation between law enforcement, veterinarians and social workers.

¹³Michigan State University, Animal Legal and Historical Center. Domestic Violence and Pets: List of States that Include Pets in Protection Orders. Available at:

<https://www.animallaw.info/article/domestic-violence-and-pets-list-states-include-pets-protection-orders#:~:text=The%20law%20authorizes%20courts%20to,child%20residing%20in%20the%20household.%22>

¹⁴Ley 17/2021, de 15 de diciembre, de modificación del Código Civil, la Ley Hipotecaria y la Ley de Enjuiciamiento Civil, sobre el régimen jurídico de los animales.

¹⁵In Sweden, the organisation Se Sambandet works to provide information and training on the relationship between animal abuse and domestic violence. More information at: <https://sesambandet.se/>.

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