**Community Awareness and Resources Addressing LINK Violence in Singapore**

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A short poll on social media indicated that about 70% of respondents were aware that animal abuse and domestic violence could occur together. Of these, 40% had learned about it through direct sources (personal experience, work, or close ones) while the remaining 60% through indirect sources (news, books, online). While the above survey is by no means representative of the community’s response towards the animal-human link in violence, it does give an indication of the prevalence of such a phenomenon in society.

Interestingly, a similar survey conducted informally among young social workers practicing in the community setting yielded vastly different results. Nearly all respondents indicated that they had not come across such instances of animal and domestic abuse in the work context and were not aware of the link between animal violence and other crimes. While this may be due to a lack of working experience, it is also indicative of a lack of conversation and resources addressing LINK violence in the social service sector.

In contrast, animal welfare groups are most outspoken when it comes to animal abuse and over the years, this has translated into a greater awareness of early indicators of violence and/or the propensity for crime in perpetrators of animal cruelty. For example, Cat Welfare Society (CWS) released a video earlier this year depicting the profile of a convicted cat abuser shared from the perspective of the perpetrator’s ex-girlfriend, who had also been on the receiving end of dating violence (Cat Welfare Society, 2017).

Animal welfare groups continue to make a concerted effort to advocate for the welfare rights of community animals and household pets in Singapore through a multi-handed approach that encompasses the law, community, social welfare and mental health agencies (Lau, 2017). However, efforts to address LINK violence are pursued only as means to an end – that is to address the risk of recurrence and relapse among animal abuse perpetrators. Furthermore, intervention is predominantly of a remedial nature as protective measures are not in place to educate the public of indicators of LINK violence from the get-go.

There are currently no regulations or guidelines in Singapore pertaining to cross-reporting, animal protection orders and the assessment of LINK violence. Social welfare officers tend to remain cautious about taking action against perpetrators to protect domestic animals, as existing regulations do not overtly consider animal cruelty as a form of control and manipulation in households faced with domestic violence (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2017)

Social services tend to prioritize human welfare over that of animals. Neither are there laws acknowledging the prevalence of connected incidences of domestic and animal abuse (Women's Charter, 2016). As such, most welfare officers remain ignorant of the psychological and emotional impacts of LINK violence on victims of domestic abuse. In order for a family to protect household property from an abuser, a Domestic Exclusion Order (DEO) has to be pursed at the Family Court. Unlike a Personal Protection Order (PPO) that prevents the perpetrator from using violence against the applicant, a DEO restrains the respondent from entering the applicant’s residence (AWARE Singapore, 2017), effectively protecting the family’s property as well as domestic animals from the abuser. However, a DEO may not protect a family pet from imminent danger of violence by the perpetrator, as it requires a court hearing and cannot be expedited before the trial occurs, unlike the PPO (Singapore Legal Advise.com, 2012).

The Children and Young Persons Act (CYPA) and Mental Capacity Act (MCA) are both legal provisions that seek to protect vulnerable individuals from abuse, neglect and exploitation ("HOME - Legal Protection", n.d.). The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) has the statutory power to work closely with other government and non-government agencies in the investigation, assessment and implementation of intervention plan to safeguard the child’s interest and welfare. However, LINK violence has a tendency to remain unaddressed by welfare officers since agencies tend to be more focused on physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse directly endangering the child (Children and Young Persons Act, 2011). As such, there are no guidelines for cross-reporting or collaborative efforts between government ministries, community-based social service agencies and animal welfare groups to protect both human and animal victims of LINK violence.

Another challenge in tackling LINK violence can present itself in the disparate priorities and objectives between animal welfare groups and social service agencies. While animal welfare groups are extremely involved in working to protect animals, social services focus predominantly on ensuring the safety of vulnerable children and adults. Efforts to address LINK violence can only be strengthened when helping professionals and animal welfare volunteers recognize and acknowledge the negative ripple consequences of LINK violence on both human and animal victims. Currently, there is a dearth of research and academic discourse in Singapore addressing LINK violence and the psychological trauma it can cause to victims of domestic abuse exposed to animal cruelty (Teng, 2017).

Even with convicted animal abuse cases, it may be difficult to pin down a perpetrator’s patterns of interpersonal violence. Social agencies are not forthcoming with such information due to the sensitive nature of domestic violence. Furthermore, unless the victim had filed an official report against the abuser, such information would be rendered inadmissible at court. At the same time, social service agencies tend to take a more cautious approach towards reporting signs of animal abuse and neglect, especially in the midst of domestic violence investigations and other family-based interventions. For example, despite the poor living conditions of the 94 Siamese cats being breed in a single flat, CWS was only alerted and involved in the cats’ rescue an entire week after the Housing Board had finally contacted occupants regarding hoarding-related concerns (Lau, 2017).

Nearly 80% of Singaporeans live in government-built flats under the Housing Development Board’s (HDB) Home Ownership Scheme ("Why 80% of Singaporeans live in government-built flats", 2017). According to HDB regulations, flat owners are not allowed to keep cats as pets in their homes (Housing and Development Board, 2017). While the regulation is not strictly enforced by local authorities, complains from neighbors of a domestic cat not being “contain[ed] within the flat, roam[ing] indiscriminately, shed[ding] fur and defecat[ing] or urinat[ing] in public areas” could easily result in owners being forced to give pet cats away (Tan, 2017). Being vulnerable to a contest of cat ownership in HDB flats has strong implications on the reporting of potential LINK violence at home. Victims may be fearful of reporting domestic abuse or even violence towards pets if it entails a home visit paid by authorities. Furthermore, as ‘illegal boarders’ of the home, cats may not be entitled to protection even if threatened by domestic abuse.

In conclusion, swift reporting and monitoring of LINK violence within the home and community environment requires the collaboration and cooperation of multiple agencies, both public and voluntary, and a systemic yet creative approach to working around the constraints of the law. This is why there needs to be a greater awareness of LINK violence not just among the public and animal welfare groups, but especially in government agencies and community based social services. Animal welfare groups and social service organizations must be cognizant of the bi-directional influence of the human-animal bond, and the interconnectedness between the welfare of both their human and animal charges. Awareness will pave the way for greater collaboration and information sharing between agencies, which will in term benefit all parties involved. Addressing and advocating against LINK violence will have a cumulative positive effect on community animals, family pets, perpetrators, and especially the victims of such crimes.

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