

# Domestic Violence & Pets

## "Paws for Thought"

**T**he juxtaposition of domestic abuse and our lovable, four-legged friends might seem like a bit of an oddity, right? Perhaps not...

Women can face a web of barriers when leaving an abusive relationship. These barriers can include fear, isolation, lack of resources, family or religious pressures, shame, guilt and love for their children. Not to mention the added hurdles of immigration status, language barriers or women living with disabilities.

Women's Aid refuges provide a safe, secure and supportive place for women and children fleeing abusive and violent homes.

But what about the beloved pets?

To those who are not pet owners, I imagine this may appear to be a bit of an absurd reason for a woman to stay with her abuser. To those who are, this will be painfully understandable. Our pets are a warm welcome & wagging tail after a long day, they are a source of unconditional love & affection, they are a comfort when the whole world seems against us. They are family.

Our staff are identifying more and more cases whereby women are forced to stay with their violent partners because they feel they cannot leave their pets behind. And we understand.

Research has highlighted the link between animal abuse and domestic violence and quite often a perpetrator will use the known love for a family pet as another mechanism to coerce, blackmail and manipulate his victim.

Many women will simply not want to leave their pets in a volatile and dangerous home and at the hands of an abuser who will utilise every means possible to establish and maintain power and control over his victim. He is not afraid to harm.

Unfortunately in Northern Ireland, Women's refuges do not have the means or facilities to temporarily home these pets. At Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid, we want to raise awareness that this is a common issue that we are aiming to address through exploring various pet fostering options. In light of this, and until we can establish longer-term solutions, we need women to know that there is support available for them and we will work with them to overcome whatever barriers they might face.

*Sarah Bruce*

**women's aid**

Belfast and Lisburn