

Breaking the silence Confronting animal sexual abuse

Animal sexual abuse is a distressing and taboo subject. Yet, write **Christina Warner** and **Maya Badham**, this hidden crisis, where legal, ethical and psychological factors converge, requires frank discussion

Warning: this article discusses animal sexual abuse.

Animal sexual abuse, often referred to as bestiality, involves contact of a sexual nature by a human against an animal, whether dead or alive. This incorporates a variety of behaviours such as vaginal, anal or oral penetration of an animal by a human, or of a human by an animal; fondling; oral-genital contact; penetration using an object; and injuring or killing an animal with a sexual motivation. Animal sexual abuse also includes the filming and distribution of animal sexual abuse imagery.

Legally, animal sexual abuse is usually criminalised, but the application of laws and penalties may range from being inconsistent to misunderstood. Where jurisdictions may have legislation in place to challenge the issue, application may be lax. Bringing the issue to the public consciousness ensures laws are understood, enforced and scrutinised where needed to

safeguard vulnerable animals from exploitation and abuse.

The dark connection

Growing research in this area demonstrates that animal abuse is a predictive or co-occurring crime with interpersonal violence and abuse, particularly violence against women and children. For example, research by Campbell et al (2018) found that 76% of domestic abuse survivors whose partners had histories of pet abuse had been subjected to non-fatal strangulation, 26% reported rape and 80% feared that they would be killed.

Furthermore, when compared with other reported deviant behaviours such as exhibitionism and excessive pornography use, ASA was found to be the single largest factor in predicting increased risk of child sexual abuse (M. Jenny Edwards, 2019). This marries with the results from a FOI request to the Crown Prosecution Service in 2020 which indicated that 73% of the 1,042 reviewed

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References

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 FOI request to Crown Prosecution Service, Naturewatch, 2021
 'I sat in Court at the Gisèle Pelicot rape trial. This is what I saw', Janice Turner, *The Times*, December 2024
 'British croc expert jailed for sexual abuse of dogs', Tiffanie Turnbull, *BBC News*, August 2024
 MacLean, E. L., Herrmann, E., Suchindran, S., & Hare, B, 'Individual differences in cooperative communicative skills are more similar between dogs and humans than chimpanzees', *Animal Behaviour*, 2017

Sources of support and further information

RSPCA: www.rspca.org.uk/reportaconcern (tel: 0300 1234 999 – 24-hour line)
 The freephone, 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline is on tel: 0808 2000 247 and web: www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk
 You can contact Samaritans 24 hours a day, 365 days a year on freephone: 116 123 or email: jo@samaritans.org
 Mind's support helpline: 0300 102 1234 (9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday (except bank holidays))
 For more options, visit the Helplines Partnership website for a directory of UK helplines: www.helplines.org/helplines/
 If you're outside the UK, visit befrienders.org to search by country for support helplines around the world

cases involving child sexual abuse, also involved sexual abuse of animals (Naturewatch, 2021). This link can be further established by looking to Christian L, one of the 51 men convicted in 2024 of raping Gisèle Pelicot. When police arrested him, they found 4,000 child and animal sexual abuse images on his hard drive, underscoring the connection between these crimes (*The Times*, 2024).

Regardless of species, sexual abuse leaves lasting and often severe physical and emotional trauma on the victim, with death regularly being the ultimate consequences for animals. This is tragically illustrated by the case of Adam Britton, a renowned British crocodile expert who, in 2024, pled guilty to 56 charges relating to animal sexual abuse and animal cruelty as well as four counts of possessing images of child sexual abuse. Britton sexually tortured 42 dogs, killing 39 of them (BBC News, 2024).

Real consequences

Society has a fundamental moral duty to protect its most vulnerable members, including animals and vulnerable human beings, from harm. Dogs, for example, have the emotional capacity and cognitive capability of a human toddler and are one of the species most subjected to sexual abuse (Maclean et al, 2017). As legally recognised sentient beings capable of experiencing pain, fear and suffering, animals deserve to be treated with compassion and respect, free from cruelty and exploitation.

When animal sexual abuse is left unchecked, it has profound and far-reaching impacts on society. First, it normalises a culture of violence, making it easier for individuals to perpetuate other forms of abuse, including domestic abuse, child abuse, and sexual assault. The failure to address animal sexual abuse signals a lack of accountability, fostering an environment where harmful behaviours are tolerated or ignored, emboldening perpetrators of such abuse. This not only leaves animals vulnerable to ongoing suffering and exploitation but also increases the risk to human victims.

The highlighted intersection between harm to animals and harm to children underscores the urgency of this moral responsibility. Both groups are unable to consent to sexual activity, or advocate for themselves in situations of violence, making it crucial that society steps in to prevent and address such abuse.

Laws that should protect – but do they?

Legal responses to animal sexual abuse varies between countries, with some having no legal prohibitions against sex acts with animals and others having limited legislation which only criminalises certain acts. However, no country currently has clear and stringent legislation prohibiting all forms of animal sexual abuse, as well as demonstrating a dedication to effectively enforcing it.

The UK currently has a dual approach to the sexual abuse of animals, viewing it as a serious crime under both animal welfare and criminal laws. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 (s 69) clearly makes sex with an animal illegal, with potential punishments including up to two years in custody. This legislation reflects a societal understanding of the intrinsic rights of animals and a collective moral responsibility to safeguard them from harm. However, the Act only prohibits certain sexually motivated acts with animals, with a particular focus on penetrative acts. In order to be fully protective and inclusive of all forms of animal sexual abuse, we must broaden its scope.

Additionally, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 sets broader standards for animal protection, making it illegal not just to engage in sexual acts with animals, but also to cause them unnecessary suffering, which arguably encompasses sexual abuse. Those found guilty face penalties ranging from financial penalties to a custodial sentence, and may include restrictions on pet ownership.

Closing the legislative gaps

Recent legislative developments in the UK indicate that issues surrounding animal protection and welfare are gaining greater awareness within public discourse.

The Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 declares animals as beings that are capable of feeling emotions. Despite the Act itself not creating new criminal offences, it instead binds UK policymakers to consider the welfare of animals while making important decisions. This law is a benchmark for future legal reforms that can, in turn, ensure that animals are further safeguarded against abuse. The growing emphasis on animal sentience strengthens the moral and legal discourse to address these crimes more robustly. Increased public awareness, stemming from legislative debates and campaigns surrounding the Sentience Act, has amplified calls for harsher penalties and stricter enforcement measures.

For many years, images and videos showing the torture, sexual abuse, and killing of animals have been easily accessible on social media with little or no regulation. The Online Safety Act 2023 now classifies animal torture content as a priority offence, bringing it to into the same class as other

types of content like child sexual abuse, threats to kill, and revenge pornography, that social media companies will be required to remove or face significant fines. However, much animal cruelty online content, including some forms of animal sexual abuse, may fall outside of priority offences under the Act and the responsibility for prosecuting such offences does not lay with social media companies, but with our criminal justice system which has shown a failure of due regard for these issues time and time again.

Broader legislative proposals like those within the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill 2021-23 could have further protected animals from cruelty in its various forms, including forcing animals to engage in sex. Although the Bill primarily targeted concerns like puppy smuggling and illegal pet breeding, as well as provisions to protect primates and livestock, its proposed framework could have indirectly helped to deter and address exploitative behaviour. Stricter rules surrounding breeding and trade may serve to prevent practices which encourage animal abuse through exploitation. Illegal breeders, who often disregard animal welfare, may also be more likely to engage in or enable other forms of abuse, including sexual exploitation. The Bill's emphasis on the prevention of animal cruelty, regardless of its form, reinforced the legal and societal view that these behaviours will not be tolerated. Sadly, the Bill was dropped in 2023 and only certain of its provisions were enacted in The Animal Welfare (Primate Licences) (England) Regulations 2024 and the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act 2024. As a result, we have missed this opportunity to indirectly enhance protections against all forms of animal abuse. By addressing the potential for this offending, we could have closed gaps that otherwise allow such conduct to persist.

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The legal definition of animal sexual abuse should explicitly include a wide range of abusive behaviours, including acts involving coercion, exploitation, or sexual harm to animals, regardless of the intent or outcome. Additionally, and by way of broadening the scope of potential offences, definitions should incorporate provisions which also encompass non-physical forms of abuse, such as the creation, distribution, or possession of sexually exploitative materials involving animals (as per s 69, SOA 2003 which prohibits possession of pornographic images that depict acts of bestiality (sexual activity involving animals)).

Ending the cycle of abuse

Animal sexual abuse should be considered as a serious crime to be addressed in the legal system, sufficiently reflecting the harm that has been enacted on the animal and/or human (if coerced) and the perpetrator as posing a high-risk threat to other animals and humans.

Animal sexual abuse laws form a crucial yet largely overlooked context for protecting animals from suffering. Although it is a topic that is all-too-often avoided, the knowledge of having legislation in place and the occurrences of gaps in their effectiveness is crucial as a means of advocating for justice and animal welfare. Enforcement of this legislation is not only a clear indicator of social commitment to the goal of cruelty prevention but also highlights the legal gaps within its application.

Legal discourse on what is inevitably a confronting subject also illuminates the connection between animal abuse and broader issues such as links to other forms of violence or criminal offending. In turn, we can better identify areas of possible legislative reform and raise awareness of the consequences of inaction. These discussions and subsequent oversight go to reflecting and reinforcing society's moral and ethical duty to protect vulnerable beings from harm. ●



About the author

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