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Social work, women, animal protection and intersectional feminism: Making the connections

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This article is an injunction for social workers, especially social workers who identify as intersectional feminists, to include animals in their analyses of power and to consider speciesism as a form of oppression. We note that women are numerically dominant in animal protection and social work has a history as a 'women's profession' and being influenced by feminism.

APPROACH: Our central argument is that oppression and privilege that occur across the lines of species cannot legitimately be excised from intersectional feminist discussions of power, control and domination; that doing so is to ignore the most intense and uninspected form of privilege—the privilege humans have over other animals. We follow this idea in this article as we consider why it might be that (some) feminists overlook, if not deliberately ignore, the idea of animal liberation being so much in step with other feminist analyses of power.

IMPLICATIONS: Through an extended version of intersectional feminism inclusive of species, we discuss the need to pay attention to the lives of other animals. We conclude with some notes about 'radical [emotional] intimacy' between humans and animals, and their relevance to social work.

Keywords: Animals, intersectional feminism, privilege, social work

In this article we advocate for social workers to include animals in their analyses of power and consider speciesism as a form of oppression. We note how women and feminism have shaped both social work and animal protection. We argue that species oppression and privilege should not be excluded from intersectional feminist discussions of power, control and domination; that to do so ignores the most intense and uninspected form of privilege—the privilege humans have over other animals. This idea guides our thinking as we consider why (some, if not many) feminists ignore the idea of animal liberation. We start with a brief note about our own positions as authors and follow with a discussion of some of the reasons that otherwise intersectional feminists might have for ignoring other species. We then consider how to make animals visible beyond commodities and victims, while challenging antiquated notions of animals as unfeeling, instinctual machines. Expanding

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intersectional feminism to include species, we pay attention to the lives of other animals, particularly the emotional intimacy humans and animals can share, arguing that these relations—at the very least—should be considered part of the profession's definition of the social.

About us

(Nik) I am a sociologist interested in human relationships with other animals. My research to date has focussed on the power asymmetries between species and how, and why, we might challenge them. I'm a working-class, vegan, white woman living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand.

(Heather) I am a critical social worker from Australia, who has had a long career researching violence. I am also a vegan white (settler) woman from a working-class background. My interest is in animal social work that takes seriously animal rights, rather than only focussing on the benefits animals can bring to humans.

Social work, women, and animal protection

Contemporary social work is showing increasing interest in animals, particularly in the areas of the human–animal bond and animal-assisted therapies. As a result, social work has begun to recognise that animal companions matter. This has been driven by four factors: 1) the positive effects companion animals have on humans; 2) the links between human and animal-directed violence, particularly within the home; 3) the therapeutic value of animals to humans through various animal-assisted interventions; and 4) the need to include domestic animals in disaster planning to ensure humans with animals are able to evacuate from areas engulfed by fire or flood (Evans & Grey, 2012; Fraser, 2024; Hanrahan & Chalmers, 2020; Walker et al., 2015). In recognition of these activities, both the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work *Codes of Ethics* now include statements on the welfare of animals involved in social work practice (AASW, 2020; ANZASW, 2019). While such developments are welcome, most remain focussed on companion animals alone and on the utility of these animals to humans. To date, mainstream social work remains stubbornly resistant to considering the oppression of farmed and free-roaming animals; refusing to take seriously the ethical issues posed through the torturous treatment of animals bred for: 1) the meat and dairy industries; 2) research and testing; 3) human entertainment; and 4) recreational hunting. Animals need to be included in social work's definition of the social, especially if we are to remain relevant in a world that increasingly recognises the intertwining of human, animal and planetary wellbeing.

Women often have positive attitudes towards animals

Gender matters in social work and animal protection. Women are, and have been, the majority of social workers in Australia (Hosken et al., 2021; Seymour, 2012), India (Anand, 2009), the UK (Harlow, 2004), and in Aotearoa New Zealand, as of 2024, 85% of social workers identified as female (SWRB, 2024), a similar figure to that in England of 82% (Workforce Intelligence, 2023). This is not to exclude men, transgender and non-binary people from social work; nor to suggest that gender-diverse social workers numbers are not growing (Klemmer et al., 2024); or that they cannot have positive attitudes towards animals. It is to say simply that most social workers are women, as are most animal protection activists (Aavik, 2023; Gaarder, 2011).

It is well-documented women categorically have more positive attitudes towards animals and their wellbeing than men, usually scoring more highly on measures of pro-animal attitudes (for an overview see Herzog, 2007). Also compared to men, women are more likely to be supportive of vegetarianism and veganism (Bryant, 2019). In a recent large-scale British study

called *Some animals are more equal than others*, Bradley et al. (2020) found that women and vegetarians (mostly women) were so because of their objections to animals being used in food production, pest control and medical research. As a group, women do not just have more positive attitudes towards animals (than men) but have always played an important role in animal protection, caring about, and caring for, animals. Women are more likely to be frontline workers in shelters and sanctuaries and members of animal rights communities (Gaarder, 2011), and historically, women were among the first to argue for animal rights (Elston, 1987; Kean, 1995; Lansbury, 1985). Vegan sociologist Corey Wrenn (2019a described how hundreds of women in the 19th century founded the animal rights movement in Britain, making connections between the oppression of animals and their own oppression. These women knew that the opposition of speciesism (i.e., the idea that humans are more important than other species) was core to social justice for humans and created animal shelters and charities to support their work (Wrenn, 2019a). Similarly, the history of the animal rights movements in the US is populated mostly by women (Abbey, 2020, p. 405), and in Australia, women have historically "sid[ed] with animals" and still dominate the ranks of animal advocacy today (Probyn-Rapsey et al., 2019, p. 199). In her article, *Where the Boys Aren't: The Predominance of Women in Animal Rights Activism*, Gaarder, wrote, ". . . women constitute the single most important driving force behind the animal rights phenomenon ... [that] Regardless of age, political views, or educational level, women are more likely than men to be animal advocates ... [and] ... support animal rights" (2011, p. 55).

Animals need to be protected (from humans)

The protection of animals is so desperately needed because billions of animals are subjected to widespread abuse, much of it systemic and socially sanctioned by human society (Wadiwel, 2015). Underlying these socially sanctioned forms of animal abuse are normative assumptions of human supremacy. Table 1 identifies just some of the many possible examples across the human-imposed and overlapping categories of animals: companion animals, farmed animals and free-roaming animals.

Table 1 illustrates that human society grants few, if any, rights en masse to animals regarding: species or individual distinction and natural behaviours; connections with others (beyond humans); rights of residence (land or sea); fertility control; relationships with offspring; rescue from disaster; life itself; or a dignified death. Some of the rights denied to animals above rest upon the same logic as when denying them to women (e.g., no claim to bodily rights) and all of them involve assumptions of the supremacy of one group (humans) over another (animals); the same kind of assumptions that intersectional feminists roundly and robustly critique when it comes to humans (Kemmerer, 2011). Yet few intersectional feminists are interested in the oppression against animals.

Intersectional feminism and species

Many social workers (still) identify with feminism (Anand, 2009; Baines, 2020; Hosken et al., 2021; Seymour, 2012). While there is not one feminist social work (Hosken et al., 2021), commonly used practice principles include: seeing women in context; linking the personal with the political and vice versa; appreciating women's potential power and need to make their own decisions; flattening power hierarchies in and among women, and valuing women's strengths; recognising women's diversity, and looking for collective responses to individually experienced social problems (Dominelli, 2002). Fourth wave feminist social work (roughly post-2010) is now more likely to be intersectional, more inclusive of gender diversity and not shy to use the concept of patriarchy to push for macro, not just micro, change. Klemmer et al. (2024, p. 158) provided a good example, writing that, "Intersectional feminism explicitly

Table 1. Examples of Normative Assumptions about Non-human Animals and their Maltreatment

Companion (pet)	Farmed (livestock)	Free-roaming (wild)	Overarching assumptions and abuses
That any species humans designate as pet-worthy can be captured and kept as pets.	That any species humans designate as produce can be captured and kept in farms.	That any species humans designate as wild can be captured and kept in zoos.	*That animals can be legitimately homogenised through the category of animal; that they have no right to species distinction.*
That pets should be relied on to soothe, entertain or otherwise comfort humans, and be ever-available for petting.	That farmed animals have no intrinsic right to their skin, muscle or other body parts.	That free-roaming animals have no intrinsic right to their skin, muscle or other body parts; That they make good targets for human hunters.	*That animals have no claim to body rights.*
That animals can and should be taken from their families to live out their lives as human pets.	That animals can be farmed for because humans think they taste or feel good (as in soft leather).	That free-roaming animals have no connections with others (no group or family clusters) and that it is not important to learn about them.	*That animals have no right to their connections in and among their own species.*
That pets can be expected to lead their lives contained in aviaries, fish tanks, dog runs and/or sterilised human homes, and behave as humans wish.	That farmed animals can lead their lives in highly constrained and human regulated conditions such as factory farms, where even touching their offspring may be forbidden.	That wild animals do not live anywhere in particular; that the migration patterns of free-roaming animals should not stand in the way of economic progress for humans; nor the species of free-roaming animals that use the land as their habitat.	*That animals have few or no rights to enact species-specific behaviour or the right to occupy land or sea.*
That companion animals are legitimately bred through forced impregnation, and that the products of such reproduction are owned by humans who may sell them as commodities on the open market.	That farmed animals are legitimately bred through forced impregnation, and that the products of such reproduction are owned by humans who may sell them as commodities on the open market.	That wild animals have no right to reproduce unless in zoos or other artificially constructed compounds, where they may be sold by humans as commodities on the open market.	*That animals have no right to fertility control or to their offspring*
That when human-induced disasters occur, such as drought, fires, floods, it is reasonable, if not lawful, to abandon these companion animals, even if they have no means of escape.	That when human-induced disasters occur, such as drought, fires, floods, it is reasonable if not lawful to abandon these farmed animals, even if they have no means of escape.	That when human-induced disasters occur, such as drought, fires, floods, it is reasonable if not lawful to try to save only the land inhabited by humans.	*That in times of (human-induced) disasters, animal protection is not a big priority and their deaths do not really count.*
That when animal shelters get overcrowded from humans surrendering or abandoning their pets (as seen during Covid), it is understandable if not lawful to euthanise perfectly healthy animals.	That when the price of livestock falls below the cost to keep them, or they have aged out of their utility for humans, it is understandable if not lawful to have them slaughtered.	That it is understandable if not lawful to cull wild animals (such as kangaroos, horses, deer) if they bother humans or get in the way of economic progress, even if these animals are endangered.	*That if humans do not want them, animals have no right to live.*
That pets such as kittens and puppies may be thrown out in garbage bins or drowned if they are surplus to human requirements.	That it is lawful to slaughter farmed animals in such brutal and terrifying conditions; that it is designated as “humane” to gas pigs alive; and that it is convenient to shred day old male chicks because roosters are mostly redundant in the animal agriculture business.	That it is understandable if not lawful to cull wild animals if they bother humans or get in the way of economic progress, or new housing developments even if these animals are endangered.	*That animals have no right to a dignified death*

rejects the legitimacy of patriarchal rule and initiates social movements to alter laws and customs to ensure that equality and social justice for marginalized groups are achieved".

Non-human animals need humans to create major social change—including new laws and customs—and feminist social workers would do well to lean on intersectional feminist arguments that include animals in their analyses of power and to consider species as an axis of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black American legal scholar and rights activist originally coined the term intersectionality in 1989, to refer to the ways Black women's experiences were intersected by their experiences of racism and sexism; that their experiences were more complicated than say, adding up the harms from black men's experiences of racism, white women's experiences of sexism or white working-class people's experiences of classism (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Weldon, 2008). Since then, feminist intersectionality has expanded to help us understand the nuances of oppressed (devalued) and privileged (overvalued) social identities, such as those associated with race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, age and geographical location. As Angela Davis argued (2017), black and Indigenous women have redefined the very project of feminism—from a narrow, middle-class, white women's feminism to one that has intersectionalism as its basis. However, she also argued that it is a shame that we seem to have accepted the original idea of intersectionality and left it largely uninspected. Instead, she calls for continued attempts to find other ways to talk about the messiness of intersectionality.

Intersectional feminists recognise that the intersection of social identities (such as race, gender, class) are interconnected and interdependent, often reinforcing each other, for example, the privileges afforded white, younger, able-bodied men on the basis of their overvalued identities as white, young, able-bodied and male (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Most intersectional feminists challenge all forms of domination—except domination by species. And yet, some of the key ideas that underpin both intersectionalism and ecofeminism offer powerful tools for the analysis of speciesism. Early ecofeminists, for example, wrote about the ways animal oppression and the dehumanising logics of racism and settler colonialism were connected (Taylor, 2024). Similarly, Deckha (2012) pointed out that incorporating a postcolonial approach to animal oppression allows for a response to the oft-invoked charge of elitism, ethnocentrism, and imperialism aimed at anti-oppression, vegan advocates. A charge that Robinson (2020) argued is, in fact, a barrier to Indigenous veganism. Deckha (2012) pointed out that it is commonly argued that veganism is only accessible to white, western, urban elites. Yet this, she argued, "obscures the reality that in many parts of the globe, it is more expensive to lead a nonvegetarian lifestyle than a vegetarian lifestyle, with animal flesh marked as a luxury item or indulgence" (p. 535). Elsewhere we have provided further elaboration for expanding intersectional feminism to include species (see Fraser et al., 2021). Here we want to explore the idea that oppressions should never be placed in a hierarchy.

Intersectionality rightfully urges us not place human oppressions in a hierarchy, so there is no crude tallying up of how many oppressed identities one has (also called the race to the bottom or oppression olympics). However, we think this reluctance to place oppression and privilege in a hierarchy needs to be rethought where humans and animals are concerned. We say this *because there is no more radical a dichotomy than the one between humans and animals.* As soon as the term *animal* is invoked, the door is flung open to socially sanctioned abuses of unimaginable kinds (such as the live-shredding of day-old chicks, also see Table 1 above). As devastating as human oppression is for all oppressed, no other human dichotomy allows for the dominant group to lawfully, and with very little/no outcry, cull or farm the oppressed for food, forcibly impregnate them to be sold

as commodities on the open market, for the consumption of their offspring, skin and flesh.

Why might so many intersectional feminists ignore species?

Despite the vast array of well documented, socially sanctioned and culturally normative forms of animal abuses and suffering and their connection to human forms of oppression, including gender and sexual oppression, intersectional feminists still largely ignore domination and oppression by species. Why might this be so? We outline three possibilities below.

The first fear is that many of the gains of feminism in the last few decades might be lost if we focus too closely on other animals. In part this is due to the essentialist legacy of (some) cultural ecofeminisms that argued the connection between women and nature was grounded in biology. It is key, here, then to remember that social ecofeminism did not make such claims, instead arguing that the relations of oppression across nature and gender were socially constructed (Gaard, 2011). However, this fear is the outcome of working within traditional paradigms that not only leave established ideas of human supremacy intact, but often actively support them (e.g., through scholarship choices, funding body rationales, etc.) and thus devalue forms of *animal studies* (used as an umbrella term here) as feminine, feminised and based on emotion (Fraiman, 2012; Probyn-Rapesy et al., 2019). It is here, perhaps, that we feel most let down by feminists who refuse to address speciesism. After all, feminists of any ilk should be aware of the need to be attendant to their/our epistemological position and the attendant need to be aware that if we do want to criticise the centrality of rationalist machinations, then we have to do so wherever they appear—even if that appearance is in feminist and/or animal studies work.

The second reason many feminists sidestep or ignore *the animal question* is that they want to continue to consume meat, dairy and other animal products without having to question the ethics of doing so. Carnism is a compelling discourse in most societies, including Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, where we are writing from. Feminists, like so many people, often profess a love of animals while promoting meat-eating. Think Donna Harraway eating a ham sandwich (Charles, 2022), or Plumwood's "context-sensitive semi-vegetarian position" (2004, p. 53). To paraphrase Nickie Charles (2022), many feminists do not see the moral inconsistency of purporting to love animals while also eating them.

The third major reason is that this fear of being associated with animals (and their low status) spills over into the lives of professionals including academics. As we have argued elsewhere (Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Taylor & Fraser, 2021) the doing of feminist animal studies in the academy is subject to multiple forms of denigration: that it is 'soft' and 'fluffy' work focussing on something (other animals) that is not important, and that it is predominantly done by women. As Probyn-Rapsey et al. (2019) argued, animal studies only really gained academic respectability when certain male academics were nominated "founding fathers", despite earlier feminist work already occurring in this area. Similarly, Fraiman (2012, p. 100) pointed out that "proximity to this feminized realm" manifests in an anxiety which she labels "pussy panic" that leads to a devaluing of feminist contributions.

Paying attention to the lives of other animals through intersectional feminism

Social workers have found it very useful to draw from the notion of intersectionality and are well positioned to include animals given their/our focus is on the social and social problems. An intersectional feminist

reading of human–animal relations is paramount in social work if we are to create real social change—the kind non-human animals desperately need. Intersectional feminist understandings rest upon the idea of praxis—of a need to use theoretical understandings to drive real-world change.

Intersectional feminism, inclusive of species, offers a wholistic possibility of social change. Termed by some as *total liberation*, it is argued that, to free any marginalised group, all others must also be freed because the structures of oppression share commonalities across all groups. In this way, feminist analyses of human–animal relations, the place where imbalances play out at their most extreme, are analyses of power: to be human is to hold power over other animals. And an analysis of this power, its links to gendered (and other forms of) inequality, and its multidimensionality helps extend feminist thinking and animal studies thinking in turn.

An intersectional feminist lens that centralises the power asymmetries they experience vis-a-vis humans, allows us to see the routine harms perpetuated on animals. As Woodward (2008, p. 6 cited in Banks, 2016, p. 63) argued, "We need to move beyond 'the reductive issue of animals' lack of language to imagine the potential of new discourses between humans and animals". Birke pointed out that these relationships are those of kin, where animals "share in the co-creation of meaning, and intersubjectivity" (Birke, 2007, p. 314). Several feminists are currently exploring these questions of relationality with other animals. And, as Donovan argued over two decades ago, this necessitates close attention to other animals, not merely theorising about them in an abstract sense, but working alongside them to develop what we might refer to today as solidarity in our attempts at multispecies justice: "implicit in feminist animal care theory … is a dialogical mode of ethical reasoning, … wherein humans pay attention to—listen to—animal communications and construct a human ethic in conversation with the animals rather than imposing on them a rationalistic, calculative grid of humans' own monological construction" (2006, p. 307).

Recognising interspecies emotional intimacy

In and beyond social work, we need a comprehensive body of work that attends to our intimate emotional relations with other animals and demonstrates what relationships based on care and mutual respect might look like. One key part of this requires acknowledging that the *different other* is simply that—different, not inferior. And it flows from this that we will also need different tools in our toolkit if we are to *see* and concomitantly make visible such relationships. In her work called *Intimate strife: The unbearable intimacy of human animal relations*, Beth Carruthers (2009, p. 44) wrote,

> We like to view ourselves as moral beings; we want to do the right thing, whatever that may be, and in the case of human–non-human relations, when we go in search of it, somehow that right thing seems always to reflect back as an image of self-interest (solely, or primarily human) as paramount and separate from the interests of other beings.

When it comes to recognising what animals offer in and beyond humans, we can be more than well intentioned. To do so, however, we need truly innovative ways of looking at the world and other animals in it if we are to achieve this elevation of other species—methods that allow us to decentre the human and our preoccupations with language and symbolism. Returning to feminist theories of the body and marrying them with ethnographic methods that have room for sensory input is one way forward (Borthwick, 2006; Hamilton & Taylor, 2017).

When we choose to pay attention to interspecies relationships, we can often see a kind of radical intimacy. An intimacy, that if

heeded, has the potential to raise questions about the capacities of other animals on their own terms instead of on ours. It is precisely this relationality that is made visible when we attend to close relationships across species. Importantly, this need not be limited to animal companions. We can look at radical intimacies in animal sanctuaries too, for instance, and see the ways in which other species interact with each other and with us. Those working from this premise argue that this kind of ethics of care approach is needed at an epistemological as well as practical level if we are to dismantle current oppressive structures. Writing about Singer and Regan's attempts to disassociate themselves from sentimentalist, and presumed feminine, approaches to animal wellbeing preface in *Animal liberation* (1975) and *The case for animal rights (*1983) respectively, Donovan (1990, p. 351) argued,

> Regan's and Singer's rejection of emotion and their concern about being branded sentimentalist are not accidental; rather, they expose the inherent bias in contemporary animal rights theory towards rationalism, which, paradoxically, in the form of Cartesian objectivism established a major theoretical justification for animal abuse.

This rationalist basis for animal rights, which tends to be the mainstream one, therefore closes down one of the most important questions about our relationships with other animals: what might these relationships look like if we had not boxed ourselves in with specific beliefs about other animals, their place and their faculties? In following this question, we can then promote the idea of "abolitionist feminism" (Davis, 2017). Abolitionist feminism which focusses on imagining transformation stands in opposition to punitive feminism—the kind of feminism that, for example, argues for punitive solutions to the violence against women. And while this means that we are constantly caught up in trying to "find ways to give expression to the social reality that always exceeds our ability to find concepts" for it (Davis, 2017), it urges us to imagine something different and thereby becomes about transformation as opposed to integration.

Social work, by its definition, focuses on the social dimensions of life of which animals are part. Human–animal relations should be considered part of the profession's definition of the social. When we pay attention to the lives of other animals, particularly the emotional intimacy humans and animals can share; and when we use an expanded version of intersectional feminism (inclusive of species) we can begin to understand important social relations as yet under recognised and undervalued.

Concluding comments

This article calls for social workers, especially those purporting to use intersectionality, to include species as an axis of privilege (for humans) and oppression (for animals).

To quote Ahmed (2017, p. 2), "To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable". Some intersectional feminists are questioning everything and are working towards a better world for all animals, humans included (see also for example, Gigliotti, 2017, 2022; Salmen & Dhont, 2023). However, most are not, at least when it comes to animals. Many feminists (social work or otherwise) do not consider other species, even while happily embracing the idea of intersectionality and extending it; one that dismantles hierarchies and their attendant oppressions, from its original focus on Black women to other marginalised (human) groups. We find this curious, short-sighted, and often disheartening given women's proximity to animal protection and animal rights movements both in the past and today (Elston, 1987; Gaarder, 2011). We also find it disturbing given animals need protection from humans more than ever. This article, then, is a call to heed Angela Davis's (2017) comment that we need to find other ways to talk about the

messiness of intersectionality, in particular by incorporating other animals, and how that can be done from within social work, and how it might affect social work practice and theory. We have argued that paying attention to the radical intimacies of human–animal relations using the tools provided by an intersectional feminism that draws on Black and Indigenous feminisms will allow us to re-think and to imagine a different future; one that dismantles hierarchies and their attendant oppressions.

We have argued that women's involvement in both social work and animal protection makes for some relevant and, as yet, underexplored possibilities. Ahmed (2017, p. 15) wrote, "In a world in which *human* is still defined as *man*, we have to fight for women and as women". To this we would like to add that in a world in which human is still defined as almighty, we have to fight for animals and prevent their abysmal treatment as animals.

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