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Trap, Snip, Repeat: Cat Overpopulation and Gendered Labour in a Feral Sterilisation Programme

Поймать, отрезать, повторить – рост
популяции кошек и гендерный труд
в программе стерилизации диких
животных

Абстракт

Рост популяции кошек в Торонто в Канаде становится проблемой. Небольшие и часто разрозненные группы волонтеров, работающие на различных должностях, предлагают помощь в борьбе с огромным количеством пометов бездомных и одичавших кошек. Одной из таких организаций является Toronto Street Cats. Эта группа волонтеров работает с помощью Общества защиты животных в Торонто (англ. Toronto Humane Society) для реализации ежемесячной программы отлова/кастрации/выпускания (англ. trap/neuter/release, TNR). Группы смотрителей ухаживают за зарегистрированными колониями диких кошек и отлавливают кошек репродуктивного возраста. Раз в месяц этих кошек стерилизуют, вакцинируют, обрабатывают от паразитов и чипируют в рамках так называемого

Trap, Snip, Repeat:
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Abstract

Cat overpopulation in Toronto, Canada, is a serious and growing problem. Small, and frequently isolated, groups of volunteers work in a variety of capacities to help mitigate the large numbers of litters produced by stray and feral cats. One such organisation is Toronto Street Cats. This volunteer group works with the help of the Toronto Humane Society to operate a monthly trap/neuter/release (TNR) programme. Groups of caretakers look after registered feral cat colonies and capture cats of breeding age. Once a month these cats are sterilised, vaccinated, treated for parasites, and microchipped in an evening-long marathon. Volunteers in veterinary medicine (registered veterinary technicians [RVTs], veterinary assistants and veterinarians) comprise the medical staff who provide treatment and perform the assembly-line surgeries. Post-surgery, the cats are taken by the volunteers to a recovery facility and

вечернего марафона. Волонтеры с ветеринарной квалификацией (зарегистрированные ветеринарные техники [англ. registered veterinary technicians, RVTs], ветеринарные ассистенты и ветеринары) – это медицинский персонал, который обеспечивает лечение и проводит множество операций, как на заводском сборочном конвейере. После операции кошки доставляются волонтерами в реабилитационный центр, а затем, после полного выздоровления, их отпускают обратно в зарегистрированные колонии. Волонтеры, входящие в группы по уходу, почти исключительно женщины, как и медицинский персонал, который проводит операции и помогает до и после операции. В статье, основанной на этнографических данных и вспомогательных источниках, дается представление о трудовой жизни женщин, которые заботятся о диких кошках, живущих среди нас в Торонто.

Ключевые слова: дикие кошки, ветеринары, женский труд, стерилизация/кастрация, отлов/кастрация/выпускание

are then released back to their registered colonies, once they have fully recuperated. The volunteers within the caretaker groups are almost exclusively women as are the medical personnel who perform surgery and assist pre- and post-operatively. Informed by ethnographic and secondary source data this article provides a glimpse into the work lives of the women who care for the feral cats living amongst us in Toronto.

Keywords: Feral cats, veterinary technicians, women's labour, spay/neuter, trap/neuter/release

Introduction

In Canada, with the exception of wildlife, most nonhuman animals are legally defined as property (livestock, test-subjects, zoo attractions, etc.). Predictably, they suffer considerably at the hands of humans. Poorly housed, fed improperly, cruelly slaughtered for food and clothing, experimented on, forced to perform or otherwise coerced into service, the commodification and victimisation of nonhuman animals to serve human needs and desires is a well-established practice,¹ Similarly, compa-

¹ American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), “Preventing Animal Cruelty and Torture (PACT) Act (H.R. 2293 / S. 1831): Give Federal Law Enforcement the Ability to Prosecute Horrific ‘Crush Videos,’” accessed 2 December, 2022, https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/texashumane/pages/90/attachments/original/1509945978/ASPCA_Factsheet_-_PACT_Act.pdf?1509945978; Humane Society of the United States website, “Fighting Animal Cruelty and Neglect,” accessed 2 December 2022, <https://www.humanesociety.org/all-our-fights/fighting-animal-cruelty-and-neglect>; National Centre of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, “The NCJFCJ Releases Resolution Regarding Animal Cruelty and Its Link to Violence,” 9 August, 2019, <https://www.ncjfcj.org/news/the-ncjfcj-releases-resolution-regarding-animal-cruelty-and-its-link-to-violence/>; National Center for the Prosecution of Animal Cruelty, accessed 2 December 2022, <https://ncpac.ca/>; Asia for Animals,

nion animals, often thought of as special and awarded agency because they “belong to someone” are sometimes victimised to serve the most trivial of humans’ carnival desires in the tightly controlled yet highly unstable conditions of liquid modernity. There are many ways that humans relate to their animal companions. Some humans anthropomorphise the animal, but are speciesist, whilst others are not only speciesist, but also reject the sentience of the animal. It is this latter group who are most at risk of contributing to the problem of feral cats in Toronto. When domestic cats are abandoned as the detritus of consumer culture because their “owners” are either unable or unwilling to care for them they become liminal beings; no longer commodified “pets,” but neither true urban wildlife. These animals are not simply a by-product of late capitalism’s cruel indifference, but also comprise a pre-requisite for the system’s continuation. It is through them that we consider the ethic of care and gendered labour in interspecies care work.

Employing standpoint epistemology, this article explores the processes in which pink-collar labourers disproportionately share the burden of caring for animals that constitute Toronto’s feral cat population. This article utilises an analytic framework informed by critical sociology and human–animal studies and concludes with a discussion of potential administrative and legislative interventions designed to address cat overpopulation in Toronto.

Cats in Canadian Households

Cats are Canada’s most common companion animal, with an estimated 8.1 million cats living in Canadian households.² Of these cats, approximately 94% are spayed or neutered (also known as sterilised; in the cases of females, as an ovariectomy and, in males, castration, orchidectomy or orchiectomy). According to a recent report by the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (CFHS), cat and kitten admissions were twice those of dog and puppy admissions, indicating there are still plenty of unwanted litters occurring among intact cats,³ which

Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition (SMACC), “SMACC Spotlight Report (November 2022), Wild animal ‘pets’ on social media: A vicious cycle of suffering,” November, 2022, <https://www.smaccoalition.com/wild-pets-report>.

² Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, “Veterinary Demographics 2021,” accessed October 2021, <https://www.canadianveterinarians.net/about/statistics>.

³ Canadian Federation of Humane Societies/Fédération des sociétés canadiennes d’assistance aux animaux, “Cats in Canada 2017: A Five-Year Review of Cat Overpopulation,” accessed August 2018, https://humanecanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Cats_In_Canada_ENGLISH.pdf, 5, 11–18.

may be partially explained if these “owned” cats had one or more litters prior to their sterilisations. If they are among the 6% that are still intact (not sterilised/spayed or neutered) they may escape from their homes, be abandoned or dumped by their “owners,” or allowed to roam outdoors without supervision, encountering and potentially breeding with other unsterilised cats and reproducing at impressive rates.

Reproductive Cycle of the Female

A female cat can have her first estrous (or “heat”) cycle at around six months of age and sometimes even earlier. Females are seasonally polyestrous, meaning their cycles is affected by environmental elements such as temperature and daylight. In the Northern Hemisphere they will cycle multiple times throughout a period from late winter to early autumn, but in warmer (tropical) regions they may cycle all year. Cats are also what are known as “induced ovulators,” which means that, unlike humans who ovulate at regular, cyclical intervals, it is the act of copulation itself that results in the passing of an egg, and a female can breed at any point during her heat.⁴ An intact female cat may copulate with multiple males over the course of her cycle which means that each kitten in a litter may have a different sire.⁵ Once pregnant, the gestation period is approximately sixty-three days, and a female may become pregnant again one to two weeks after giving birth,⁶ which means it is possible for female cat to still be nursing kittens and become pregnant with another litter. This means a female could conceivably give birth to two to three litters per year, with anywhere from one to five kittens per litter. Even using conservative estimates, one female over the course of her lifetime may produce a large number of offspring which, if left intact and survive long enough to reproduce on their own, may each

⁴ John A. Bukowski and Susan Aiello, “Breeding and Reproduction of Cats,” Merck Veterinary Manual, July 2011, <https://www.merckvetmanual.com/cat-owners/routine-care-and-breeding-of-cats/breeding-and-reproduction-of-cats>; Autumn A. Davidson, “Management of Reproduction of Cats,” Merck Veterinary Manual, August 2018, <https://www.merckvetmanual.com/cat-owners/reproductive-disorders-of-cats/management-of-reproduction-of-cats>.

⁵ Benjamin L. Hart and Lynette A. Hart, “Normal and Problematic Reproductive Behaviour in the Domestic Cat,” in *The Domestic Cat: The Biology of its Behaviour*, 3rd ed. Dennis C. Turner and Patrick Bateson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 33–34.

⁶ Cats Protection UK, “Pregnant Cats, Birth, and Care of Young Kittens: Cats Protection Essential Guide 18,” accessed August 2018, www.cats.org.uk/uploads/documents/cat-care-leaflets-2013/EG18_Pregnant_cats,_birth_and_care_of_young_kittens.pdf.

produce multiple litters of their own and so on, meaning that literally thousands of cats can be reproduced.⁷

Feral Cats in Toronto

In 2014, the city of Toronto updated its municipal animal by-law to define a “feral cat” as, [...] a cat found in the city of Toronto that has no owner, is not socialised, and is extremely fearful or resistant to humans.⁸ “Extremely fearful or resistant to humans” is key, because a feral cat is not the same as a “stray” or “homeless” roaming cat, although it is very difficult to determine at a distance which classification to use. Stray or homeless roaming cats may be owned (or previously owned) cats that have had human contact but roam outdoors for the aforementioned reasons of abandonment, purposeful dumping, escape or with the knowledge of the owners.⁹ Feral cats, on the other hand, are the result of breeding between intact roaming cats, or other feral cats, producing litters where the surviving kittens develop completely devoid of, or with minimal, human contact over the course of their lives. These feral cats are unsocialised and usually unadoptable. It is extremely difficult to quantify exact figures related to feral cat populations. In Toronto, it is estimated that there are anywhere from 20,000 to as many as 100,000 feral cats within the city.¹⁰

The Inception and Development of Toronto’s TNR Programme

A few years ago, in an attempt to decrease these numbers, a few veterinarians and one Toronto city councillor obtained funds and secured a small space to begin a spay/neuter clinic for feral cats. Initially staffed only by the three founding veteri-

⁷ Christine Budke and Margaret Slater, “Utilization of Matrix Population Models to Assess a 3-Year Single Treatment Nonsurgical Contraception Program Versus Surgical Sterilization in Feral Cat Populations,” *The Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 12, no. 4 (October 2009): 277–292, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888700903163419>.

⁸ Toronto Street Cats, *The TNR Manual*, 2018, <https://torontostreetcats.com/information/re-sources/>.

⁹ Canadian Federation of Humane Societies/Fédération des sociétés canadiennes d’assistance aux animaux, “Cats in Canada 2017,” 5, 11–18.

¹⁰ Toronto Street Cats, *The TNR Manual*.

narians, surgeries were performed on about eight cats per session;¹¹ however, word of mouth and social media led to more volunteers, more funding, and, ultimately, a permanent location at the Toronto Humane Society (THS). Eventually, a coalition which became known as the Toronto Feral Cat Coalition formed among humane organisations, rescue groups, and municipal animal services to establish a larger, more coordinated TNR programme which now receives regular municipal funding in an attempt to better address Toronto's cat overpopulation dilemma.¹² At the time of writing, TNR services in the city of Toronto are still suspended due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Toronto's TNR Programme in Action

Toronto's TNR programme is part of a population control strategy whereby feral cats living in managed, registered colonies are humanely captured by specially trained colony caretakers, transported to a dedicated spay/neuter site, sterilised, and given additional medical treatment. Then, once recovered, they are released back to their original colony locations. TNR programmes typically exist within municipal boundaries, but Toronto's TNR programme has expanded to cover colonies throughout the greater Toronto area and, since its inception, has sterilised over 5,000 cats.¹³

Before the COVID-19 pandemic caused the City of Toronto to suspend its monthly clinics, the Toronto programme was a frenetic but well-organised monthly evening of sterilisation. Colony caretakers carefully trap, register, and transport their cats to these sessions. Depending on the number of cats trapped, anywhere from thirty to fifty are sterilised during one evening's event. The volunteers consist of veterinarians, RVTs, veterinary students, veterinary assistants, colony caretakers, administrative personnel, and others who perform tasks including laundry, cleaning/sterilising instruments, and bundling/autoclaving surgical packs.

Clinics begin at 1700 hours with caretakers transporting their trapped cats to the THS' specified TNR area. Each cat receives a unique identification number and is catalogued on a caretaker sheet, which accompanies the cat throughout her/his TNR journey. The event occurs assembly-line style, within four primary rooms:

- the "waiting room" where trapped cats are held and separated into three groups: female, male, and unknown,

¹¹ Johanna Booth (DVM) in discussion with Kirsten Grieve, August, 2019.

¹² Toronto Street Cats, *The TNR Manual*.

¹³ Toronto Street Cats, *The TNR Manual*.

- the “premedication room” where cats receive their initial examination and sedative,
- the “induction room” where they receive treatment and are prepped for surgery,
- and the “surgical theatre” where the actual spays and neuters are performed.

After an initial visual examination within its trap, each cat is pre-medicated with a sedative by an RVT. After the sedative has taken effect, cats go to the induction area where they receive more thorough physical exams by a veterinarian. Any medical items of note during this exam (missing or broken teeth, skin allergies, wounds or sores, parasites, pregnancy, lactation, etc.) are logged on the caretaker sheet. Pregnancies are terminated and ovariohysterectomy will occur as long as it is not a threat to the female (i.e., if she is not too near parturition or considered a surgical risk). This occurs in other TNR programmes as well.¹⁴ Only in extremely rare cases of severe illness or disease, where it is unlikely the cat will survive a continued existence in the colony, are cats humanely euthanised. In the event a queen is lactating, indicating she has recently given birth, she is sterilized and returned to the colony to nurse. In the unlikely and rare event that she is deemed terminally ill or in such poor health that she would not survive either surgery and/or return to the colony, colony caretakers would trap kittens and either arrange a “wet nurse” (another lactating queen) or bottle feed the kittens with formula. Caretakers are always consulted by a veterinarian prior to euthanasia. The vast majority of cats receive clearance for surgery, and are placed under a general anaesthetic, where the following treatments are administered:

- vaccination against a number of contagious and dangerous infectious diseases including: Rabies, Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis (a highly contagious virus which causes upper respiratory infections), Feline Calicivirus (another highly contagious virus that causes respiratory illness and oral disease, and is very common in shelters and breeding colonies), and Feline Panleukopenia Virus (also known as feline distemper, another highly contagious and often fatal disease),
- a topical anti-parasitic to kill and prevent certain types of endo- and ectoparasites,
- an injection for post-surgical pain management,
- a microchip,
- and, finally, an ear-tip (the surgical removal under anaesthetic of an approximately 0.5 cm tip from the cats’ left ears, thus identifying them to caretakers as “sterilised” in order to avoid any accidental future captures).

After the cats receive their medical treatments, they are prepped and moved to the surgical theatre where the spays/neuters are performed. In cases where a female

¹⁴ Yoonju Cho et al., “Application of a High-quality, High-Volume Trap–Neuter–Return Model of Community Cats in Seoul, Korea,” *PeerJ* 8 (5 March 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.8711>.

is lactating (which indicates she recently gave birth and may still be nursing), subcutaneous fluids are also administered to bolster her hydration levels, and a “flank” spay is performed along the cat’s side rather than over her abdomen so as not to interfere with the area where nursing kittens require access, and also to avoid possible difficulty in navigating around engorged mammary glands during surgery and potential complications during the recovery period. Neuters are performed much faster than spays because they are simpler procedures, and are typically performed in the induction room in order to save surgical tables for spays. Post-surgery the cats are placed back in their corresponding traps, and transported to a dedicated recovery facility where, once fully recovered (usually after a period of 24–48 hours), they are returned to the original colony site and released.

Gendered Volunteerism in Toronto’s TNR Programme

A coordinated event like this requires a large group of dedicated volunteers. Toronto’s TNR programme has a large number of volunteers, with approximately 160 listed members and 70 “regulars”; people who volunteer multiple times per year, if not nearly every month. According to Dr. Hanna Booth, one of the programme’s founding veterinarians, among the 70 regulars “we only have one male veterinarian—the rest of the volunteers are nearly all women.”¹⁵ In fact, with the exception of fewer than six men working as transportation and shelter construction volunteers, both the TNR surgical clinic volunteers and colony caretaker volunteers are comprised entirely of women.

Gendered Labour in Animal Welfare

Women typically shoulder more responsibility than men for the care of companion animals and non-farm animals in sanctuaries, shelters and other facilities.¹⁶ Within veterinary medicine, women have surpassed men both as students in North Ameri-

¹⁵ Johanna Booth (DVM), August, 2019.

¹⁶ Claire Sterling, “Is Animal Welfare ‘Women’s Work?’” American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, accessed October 2018, www.aspcapro.org/blog/2015/11/10/animal-welfare-womens-work.

can veterinary schools and in practice.¹⁷ In 2020, women represented 61% of veterinarians in Canada, an increase from 31% in 1991, and these numbers are expected to grow.¹⁸ Women also vastly outnumber men as RVTs; in Ontario, the most populous province in Canada, men account for fewer than 5% of registered members of the province's professional association, the Ontario Association of Veterinary Technicians.¹⁹ Across Canada, approximately 98% of technicians are women²⁰ and in the United States, approximately 78% of technicians are women.²¹ In addition, women typically outnumber men in animal welfare and animal rights organisations, with women comprising over 80% of the memberships of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and The Humane Society of the United States.²² Clearly, the presence of women in nonhuman animal care is the rule, not the exception.

The Cost of Caring

Women veterinarians are more likely to work in small animal clinics that treat mostly cats and dogs, rather than in large animal veterinary medicine, and there is a belief amongst veterinarians that companion animal work requires a greater investment in “emotional labour” than does large animal medicine. The drawback to the nurturing, caring elements of small animal medicine is that it also exacts an emotional toll due to the close interaction these (primarily women) veterinarians have with clients when relaying bad news such as the diagnosis of a terminal illness, poor prognosis for existing health concerns, discussions surrounding decreased quality of life and performing euthanasia.²³ In addition, veterinarians continually

¹⁷ Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, “Veterinary Demographics 2021,” accessed October 2021, <https://www.canadianveterinarians.net/about/statistics>.

¹⁸ Jean E. Wallace and Fiona M. Kay, “Supportive Relations in a Feminized Occupation: How Male and Female Veterinarians Compare,” *Canadian Review of Sociology* 1, no. 59 (February 2022): 4–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12366>.

¹⁹ Shanna Himburg, (Member Services Manager, Ontario Association of Veterinary Technicians), personal email exchange with Kirsten Grieve. October, 2019.

²⁰ Payscale, “Average Registered Veterinary Technician (RVT) with Medicine / Surgery Skills Hourly Pay in Canada,” accessed March, 2022, [https://www.payscale.com/research/CA/Job=Registered_Veterinary_Technician_\(RVT\)/Hourly_Rate/d466905c/Medicine-Surgery](https://www.payscale.com/research/CA/Job=Registered_Veterinary_Technician_(RVT)/Hourly_Rate/d466905c/Medicine-Surgery).

²¹ Zippia, “Veterinary Technician Demographics and Statistics in The US,” accessed March, 2022, <https://www.zippia.com/veterinary-technician-jobs/demographics/#gender-statistics>.

²² Hal Herzog, *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard to Think Straight About Animals*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 134–137.

²³ Jean E. Wallace and Fiona M. Kay, “Supportive relations in a feminized occupation,” 4–22.

cite difficult discussions surrounding financial strains, treatment expense and payment with clients as one of the more onerous and stressful elements of their profession.²⁴ These pre-existing stressors were exacerbated with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and only served to increase the strain on mental health and burnout amongst those in veterinary medicine.

Veterinarians have higher rates of suicide and suicidal ideation than the general public and women veterinarians are 3.5 times more likely to commit suicide than members of the general public.²⁵ Not One More Vet, an organisation that addresses the issue of depression and suicide among veterinary professionals, reported 67% more veterinarians and 47% more veterinary support staff are “doing worse mentally this year than last.”²⁶ Dr. Elizabeth Chosa lost three members of her 87-person cohort to suicide within ten years of graduation. Upon learning of the suicides of another three veterinarians and one veterinary technician over the course of one week in March 2021, she co-founded the Veterinary Hope Foundation, an organisation providing early suicide prevention and education with a veterinary-specific curriculum.²⁷

An additional stressor is the explosion of social media outlets that allow aggrieved clients to post vitriolic complaints about clinics, veterinarians, and staff, many of whom have neither the time, patience or, in some cases, the legal resources to respond and defend themselves. With the shuttering of many clinics to members of the public during COVID-19, online platforms became the outlet of choice for

²⁴ Tony McReynolds, “Veterinarians the World Over Share Your Stress,” AAHA, April 30, 2021, <https://www.aaha.org/publications/newstat/articles/2021-04/study-veterinary-staff-the-world-over-share-your-stress/>.

²⁵ Pamela Newnham, “Vets Have Highest Suicide Risk of All Professions, Conference Told,” *The Irish Times*, August, 2008, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/vets-have-highest-suicide-risk-of-all-professions-conference-told-1.933216>; Tahlia Roy, “Veterinary Industry Grapples with High Suicide Rate Amid Staff Shortages, Inadequate Pay,” *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 16 May, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-17/veterinary-industry-grapples-with-high-suicide-rate/100142650>; Kathrin Angelika Schwerdtfeger et al., “Depression, Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Risk in German Veterinarians Compared with the General German Population,” *Vet Record*, 186, no. 15 (May 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.105430>; Suzanne E. Tomasi et al., “Suicide Among Veterinarians in the United States from 1979 through 2015,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 254, no. 1 (2019): 6, <https://doi.org/10.2460/javma.254.1.104>.

²⁶ Tony McReynolds, “An empathetic ear—and more—for veterinary professionals struggling with depression,” American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), December 3, 2020, <https://www.aaha.org/publications/newstat/articles/2020-12/an-empathetic-earand-morefor-veterinary-professionals-struggling-with-depression/?fbclid=IwAR2pCEnYDXd6gt3Fozl2zEx8mzlp4pZawywi5-NLHn0WP2oPakVAzm62xYc>.

²⁷ Tony McReynolds, “‘This Doesn’t Have to Be our Story’: Nonprofit Aims to Prevent Suicide in the Veterinary Profession,” AAHA, June 10, 2021, <https://www.aaha.org/publications/newstat/articles/2021-06/this-doesnt-have-to-be-our-story-nonprofit-aims-to-prevent-suicide-in-the-veterinary-profession/>.

dissatisfied clients; however, even before the pandemic, women in veterinary medicine report experiencing stressful client interactions more often than men.²⁸ The pandemic created significant disruptions, stressors and difficulties for all members of the veterinary profession; however, women also often face the additional (and often disproportionate) burden of managing family obligations outside clinic work that already demands a great deal of their time. A survey by the North American Veterinary Community (NAVC) found 62% of respondents (both veterinarians and nurses) felt balancing work and family life was a “frequent” cause of stress.²⁹

Subordination of the Other

Historically, women and nonhuman animals were often grouped together in that neither were considered legal “persons.” Women were subordinate to men due to women’s symbolic association with nature, whereas men were associated with culture, with nature assuming a subordinate role to culture. Reproductive activities were predominately, if not completely, relegated to women, thus allowing males the freedom of movement, development and, by extension, domination.³⁰

Some cultural feminist perspectives suggest this domination of nature by men is the primary cause behind the mistreatment of nonhuman animals, and the exploitation of women and the environment.³¹ Carol Adams theorises that both animals and women are similarly positioned as objects rather than subjects under the patriarchy.³² As objects, both women and nonhuman animals experience exploita-

²⁸ Wallace and Kay, “Supportive Relations in a Feminized Occupation,” 4–22.

²⁹ Liz Bales, “Veterinary Medicine, Motherhood, and a Pandemic,” *DVM* 360, March 2021, <https://www.dvm360.com/view/veterinary-medicine-motherhood-and-a-pandemic>; Kate Boatright, “Balancing Act,” *Today’s Veterinary Practice*, May/June 2020, <https://todaysveterinarypractice.com/balancing-act/>; Carrie Peyton Dahlberg, “Work-life Balance a Tightrope for Many Veterinarians,” *Veterinary Information Network*, November 2010, <https://news.vin.com/default.aspx?pid=210&Id=4704348&uobjectypeid=10&fromVINNEWSASPX=1>.

³⁰ Salla Tuomivirra, *Animals in the Sociologies of Westermarck and Durkheim* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 186.

³¹ Bonnie Berry, “International Progress and Regress on Animal Rights,” in *Between the Species: Readings in Human-Animal Relationships*, ed. Arnold Arluke and Clinton Sanders (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2009), 373; Josephine Donovan, “Animal Rights and Feminist Theory,” in *Social Creatures: A Human and Animal Studies Reader*, ed. Clifton P. Flynn (New York: Lantern Books, 2008), 370, 375–6.

³² Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 10th Anniversary edition (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 1990), 180.

tion, abuse, neglect, invisibility, and outright dismissal by their dominant groups; men and humans, respectively.

Within the division between humans and nonhuman animals, the dominant human group attempts to control its subjugated groups (for this article's purposes, domestic cats) through both language and action. Humans anthropomorphise cats as "independent, aloof, self-sufficient hunters," we selectively breed and purchase them based on desirable traits and their ability to rely on our beneficence, as beloved "members of the family"; however, we simultaneously charge them with the task of "looking after themselves" through isolation indoors, or casual release outdoors.³³ Only when these cats cause disruptions in human lives through so-called nuisance behaviours, do many humans react, and not always constructively.³⁴ Owned cats will be coddled and pampered, or neglected and discarded based on the whims of the humans.³⁵

Carol Gilligan's work on moral development led to her conceptualisation of the "ethic(s) of care," that is, a woman's "conception of morality [...] concerned with the activity of care [...] responsibility and relationships," rather than a man's conception of morality as "fairness," with a greater emphasis on the rules.³⁶ Diane Antonio further developed this idea, encouraging the utilisation of these ethics to examine not only the similarities between all animal life, but to develop ways of relating to the differences as well.³⁷ When women engage in these ethics of care, it promotes reflexivity to compare, contrast, extrapolate, and develop that sense of responsibility to, and solidarity with, nonhuman animals, which in turn can manifest in action, specifically here through volunteering.

Gendered Labour Historically and in Veterinary Medicine

Historically, women's connections with economic life and labour developed as more "production for use" rather than "production for exchange."³⁸ In other words,

³³ Adrian Franklin, *Animals and Modern Cultures: A Sociology of Human-Animal Relations in Modernity* (London: Sage, 1999), 89–90, 96–98.

³⁴ Dara A. Wald and Anna L. Peterson, *Cats and Conservationists: The Debate Over Who Owns the Outdoors*, (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2020), 84–87.

³⁵ Susan Hunter and Richard Brisbin, *Pet Politics: The Political and Legal Lives of Cats, Dogs, and Horses in Canada and the United States* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2016), 46–57.

³⁶ Rhys Mahannah, "'The Animal,' Systems, and Structures: An Ecofeminist-Posthumanist Enquiry," in *Animal Subjects 2.0*, ed. Jodey Castricano and Lauren Corman (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2016), 128–9.

³⁷ Rhys Mahannah, "'The Animal,' Systems, and Structures," 128–9.

³⁸ Donovan, "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory," 370, 375–6.

women's labour was utilised for production within the household, rather than exchanged for monetary gain. Women (and their emotions) were relegated to the privacy of the home, whilst men exchanged their labour power for wages in the public sphere where the exhibition of emotion, empathy, and other so-called "feminine traits" were discouraged or denigrated.³⁹ Women's domestic work is still undervalued or dismissed, and women's paid compensation for their labour continues to lag behind men's in most realms of employment.

As in so many areas of endeavour, the gendered pay gap has afflicted veterinary medicine for decades. Women outnumber men veterinarians, but continue to earn less than them. In their study on veterinarians in Alberta, Canada, Wallace and Kay⁴⁰ determined that men earn, on average, between \$100,001 and \$125,000 per year, whilst women earn, on average, between \$50,001 and \$75,000 per year.

Low pay, frustration over lack of professional acknowledgement, and dismissive behaviours by their supervisors' plague veterinary support staff as well. In fact, women respondents in veterinary technician organisations consistently cite "poor wages" and "lack of appreciation" as top reasons for burnout and turnover within their field.⁴¹

Despite the aforementioned quantifiable discrepancies, women continue to volunteer and seek professional positions within nonhuman animal care realms. For one volunteer in Toronto's TNR programme, it is knowing that she is acting on her ethics of care to help her fellow creatures that sustains her. She stated, "I love doing it because I know I'm making a difference in these cats' lives. If we don't help them, who will? Every little bit helps."⁴² When questioned as to her opinion on why more women than men volunteer with the Toronto TNR programme, one of the veterinarians replied matter-of-factly, "Well, women care more about animals than men do."⁴³ Of course, there are many men who volunteer, advocate, crusade, and seek employment in nonhuman animal health fields, and who work tirelessly to advance the welfare and care of nonhuman animals; however, in the case of this Toronto TNR programme, it seems feral cat overpopulation management is very much "women's work."

³⁹ Donovan, "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory," 370, 375–6.

⁴⁰ Wallace and Kay, "Supportive Relations in a Feminized Occupation," 4–2.

⁴¹ National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America, *NAVTA 2016 Demographic Survey Results*, 2016, <https://www.isvma.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ShouldIStayorShouldIGo.pdf>.

⁴² "JQ" (TNR volunteer) in discussion with Kirsten Grieve, August, 2019.

⁴³ "JC" (DVM) in discussion with Kirsten Grieve, August, 2019.

RVT Pandemic “Self Care” and the Effect on Volunteering

A 2020 global survey of veterinary professionals in 91 countries showed higher rates of both stress and job dissatisfaction across all the participating countries during the pandemic. The group showing the highest levels of compassion fatigue, burnout, and stress were RVTs.⁴⁴ Volunteer groups that run TNR programmes rely heavily upon skilled RVTs to not only assist in the sedation, induction, treatment, monitoring and recovery of patients, but in directing, coordinating and training veterinary students and other volunteers during the operations. RVTs and veterinarians experiencing high levels of compassion fatigue, burnout, stress and exhaustion are perhaps less likely to offer their precious and limited time away from clinic work to volunteer with animal care organisations. As such, volunteer-based activities such as TNR programmes, low cost spay/neuter clinics for economically vulnerable people, community educational events, and vaccination, sterilisation and food distribution events in rural/remote locations face a constant risk of closing.

Women far outnumber men as veterinary technicians, and there is some belief that women have more of a predilection to burnout than men,⁴⁵ which would further compromise these volunteer organizations if RVTs stopped volunteering or decreased their volunteer hours in numbers. Allowing RVTs greater autonomy over their scheduling, task load and work duties may engender a better work/life balance, particularly for female RVTs attempting to balance further work at home surrounding regular family care.⁴⁶ Furthermore, when RVTs burnout and no longer volunteer their services, the organisations suffer not only from a loss of medical knowledge and experience, but also any possible education, training and instruction for others.⁴⁷ Without the mostly women volunteers to coordinate and staff these events, nonhuman animal health would suffer.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacted a dramatic toll on the veterinary field and resulted in significant deleterious mental and physical effects on veterinary professionals.⁴⁸ As previously noted, many animal care groups depend on the skills,

⁴⁴ CM Research Ltd., “VetsSurvey 2020: Part 2,” Vetspanel, January 22, 2021., <https://www.vetspanel.com/covid-19-global-pandemic-impact-on-the-veterinary-market-vetssurvey-2020-part-2/>.

⁴⁵ Lori R. Kogan et al., “Veterinary Technicians and Occupational Burnout,” *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* 7 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2020.00328>.

⁴⁶ Lori R. Kogan et al., “Veterinary Technicians.”

⁴⁷ Melanie Greaver Cordova, “Burnout Takes a Heavy Financial Toll on Veterinary Medicine,” Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, August, 2022, <https://www.vet.cornell.edu/news/20220829/burnout-takes-heavy-financial-toll-veterinary-medicine>.

⁴⁸ Stephen L. Muzzatti and Kirsten L. Grieve, “Covid Cats and Pandemic Puppies: The Altered Realm of Veterinary Care for Companion Animals during a Global Pandemic,” *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 25, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888705.2022.2038168>.

knowledge and experience of RVTs as volunteers during their events; unfortunately, this particular group of women have arguably felt the fallout of pandemic-related burnout, compassion fatigue and exhaustion most acutely. Despite attempts by multiple organisations to address increased stressors and mental health awareness during the pandemic, there appears to be marginal recognition of how it is affecting veterinary professionals, particularly RVTs, outside their own professional governing bodies.

In instances when well-being is addressed, many of the proposed solutions offer only cursory advice without critical discussion of root causes. For example, a 2021 article published in “RVT Talk,” a monthly e-newsletter for Registered Veterinary Technologists and Technicians of Canada, entitled “De-stress your day: RVT tips for saving time”⁴⁹ begins with a perfunctory paragraph about the very real and taxing stressors faced by RVTs working during the pandemic but then, rather than focussing on employee rights, compensation, and fair labour practices, the article places the onus of care directly on the employees themselves, simply telling them to prioritise their physical and mental health so that they can remain a productive part of the team. These *bon mots* illustrate how undervalued and exploited mid-level employees in veterinary medicine are, and they do absolutely nothing to address the very real structural inadequacies and power discrepancies between the corporate owners of veterinary clinics and the employees on the front lines. The fact that being part of a “team” is emphasised repeatedly in the article does little to instill any real sense of solidarity and mutual aid, but rather imposes a sense of guilt on the part of the staff member, many of whom feel overworked and in desperate need of time off. Employees are reluctant to ask for time away from work to compose themselves, recuperate physically or mentally, or engage in better “work/life balance” because of this guilt: taking time for oneself means compounding the work load of fellow employees in an already short-staffed, stressful work environment.

Volunteerism is likely far down the “to do” list for skilled veterinary professionals. Already overworked in clinic settings during the pandemic, many of these women are exhausted at the end of their extended work days and unable to muster the energy required for additional hours volunteering. The guilt these women feel for taking time off and placing a burden on coworkers is compounded when they are unable to volunteer time to organisations they know desperately need it. In the case of community cat outreach programmes and TNR events, this guilt is twofold: first, in the knowledge that the pandemic has already caused significant disruptions in the delivery of goods, treatments and services to companion animals who have access to regular veterinary care but who are perhaps not receiving the level of care

⁴⁹ Matthew Bradford, “De-stress Your Day: RVT Tips for Saving Time,” *RVT Talk*, September 10, 2021, <https://mediaedgedigital.com/supplierinsights/rvttc/de-stress-your-day-rvt-tips-for-saving-time>.

they did pre-pandemic, and second, with the suspension (now in its second year) of sterilisation and vaccination programmes in many areas, the knowledge that the time and effort devoted to mitigating overpopulation, disease transmission and suffering among feral cats has now been, at best, diminished and, at worst, negated.

Humans' Roles and Responsibilities

A TNR programme strives to provide health care for feral cats, control rampant reproduction, eliminate an unsustainable surplus, and improve the quality of outdoor cats' lives, but a TNR programme is just one approach to one problem. It does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it a panacea; it must be utilised in conjunction with other methods to effect real change.

Implementing education and awareness campaigns in primary schools would teach children the value of proper care and respect, not only for their own companion animals, but for other human and nonhuman animals. Here again, we rely on the inordinate number of women represented in early childhood education to deliver and promote these messages of empathy, responsibility, and social awareness. Education protocols for adults are understandably more complex and challenging, but could include public awareness adverts, leaflets, social media campaigns, and cooperative events hosted by a variety of organisations (including shelters, libraries, community centres, etc.) to disseminate facts and dispel myths. Members of the public are often ignorant of nonhuman animal issues, or that problems even exist, much less that solutions require public cooperation.

With the increase in precarious labour, the erosion of social and health support services, access to affordable veterinary care is increasingly unaffordable for many people. Subsidised treatments and mobile spay/neuter clinics similar to Toronto's SNYP (Spay/Neuter Your Pet) truck, are often available only to those living in major urban centres. Rural and remote communities are forced to rely on expensive mobile veterinary services (where they even exist), or travelling volunteer support. Awareness affects policies, bringing greater accessibility and funding, so advocacy on behalf of the marginalised, the working poor, and their animal companions is vital.

In Canada, legislation requires amendments to elevate the status of nonhuman animals to more than that of property. Some progress has been made, there is still a great deal to do. For example, in the summer of 2022, Toronto's city council updated its bylaws to ensure that pets who are kept outdoors have adequate shelter to keep them safe during extreme weather conditions, but rejected a provision requir-

ing that all cats be either kept indoors or kept on a leash when outdoors. The city's mayor stated, "I just don't think we need our licensing people, who are very busy dealing with genuine safety issues, running around and chasing Fluffy the cat."⁵⁰ Setting aside the presumption that harms inflicted upon free roaming cats and the potential spread of parasites and disease to other animals and humans is not a "genuine safety issue," this was an opportunity to address the problem of free roaming cats in the city of Toronto. As previously mentioned, these cats, if not sterilised, may interact with other unsterilised cats and fight, spread disease, mate uncontrollably, or fall victim to injury or trauma. Arguably a question of municipal priorities, funding, and resource allocation, adopting amendments that do place the onus of responsibility on cat owners to contain their cat(s) within their own property and updating municipal animal welfare bylaws to include the protection of domestic cats while increasing punitive measures may be a step forward in mitigating the number of free roaming cats.

Free roaming cats create a host of issues from the arguably irritating (vocalization of intact males and females during mating, urination/defecation on private property) to the more significant impact on other animals (attacking and killing of birds and other wildlife, fighting amongst other cats or wildlife leading to injury and the spread of disease, including zoonotic diseases, shedding of parasites) to the traumatic (starvation, dehydration, exposure to extreme weather conditions, acute or chronic illness, injury, parasitism, and/or disease) and harm inflicted by humans, either unintentionally or intentionally (illegal trapping, poisoning, killing). Legislation is only one step in reducing the number of free roaming and breeding cats in any region and mitigating these harms. Enforcement is also necessary. Local animal control organisations in urban centres are the likely first point of contact for citizens who wish to report a nuisance behaviour, a cat in distress, or suspicion of illegal harm against a cat by a human; however, potential issues such as underfunding, lack of trained or available staff (lack of incentives to encourage individuals to attend certification programmes or apply for positions with their municipality's animal welfare enforcement, or positions that do not offer balanced shift work, financial remuneration or benefits), and improper equipment or facilities (old buildings or vehicles, insufficient space requirements) could impact the ability of local agencies and organisations to respond quickly and effectively.

By changing the language and laws we will enact more protection, care, and funding to establish and maintain healthy companion animal populations. When

⁵⁰ "Toronto Cats Still Allowed to Roam Free, City Council Says," *Veterinary Practice News*, July 21, 2022, <https://www.veterinarypracticenews.com/toronto-cats-still-allowed-to-roam-free-city-council-says/>.

we care about nonhuman animals we care about each other and, as the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us, good herd health benefits everyone.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, humans must turn a critical lens inward and assess the damage we cause to the environment and human and nonhuman animals by our unreflexive consumption habits. The pandemic has laid bare many inequalities; exacerbating extant ones and creating others anew. Perhaps we should use this frightening global event to gauge our levels of preparedness so that we can better care for each other and the animals with whom we share the world.

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