“I FRICKEN LOVED THEM”: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF ANIMALS WITHIN THE LIVES OF WOMEN SEEKING HELP FOR RURAL INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

A Thesis Submitted to the
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts
In the Department of Sociology
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By

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Abstract

Saskatchewan’s high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) has been well documented within government statistics. Research has demonstrated women who experience intimate partner violence and have a relationship with an animal, care deeply for their animal’s well-being and often have animal safety concerns. This human-animal bond provides a safe relationship within their lives and provides a source of comfort during times of stress. However, most intimate partner violence research has been largely urban centric. As a result, limited research has focused on women in rural areas who are seeking help for intimate partner violence while also having animal safekeeping concerns.

Using constructivist grounded theory and an anti-oppressive feminist framework, this study applied a qualitative methodology using a thematic analysis to understand who experienced rural IPV understand the roles (if any) that animals, pet, or farm, play for rural women when seeking help for IPV.

A secondary analysis was performed on two focus groups with service providers throughout Saskatchewan and 10 interviews with women who have lived experience with rural intimate partner violence. Connections were made between what service providers were seeing at their level and the experiences shared by women. It was found that women view their animals as an important support within their lives and there is further need for animal inclusive supports for those seeking help with animal care concerns. This study highlights areas for future research and policy changes to help promote the inclusion of the human-animal bond within intimate partner violence services in the province.
Acknowledgements

I want to start by acknowledging and thanking the participants. Your lived experiences and professional understandings made this thesis possible.

Thank you to my committee member, Dr. Karen Wood, for welcoming me into RESOLVE and mentoring me throughout the research process. A big thank you to my co-supervisor, Dr. Colleen Dell, for her commitment and consistent willingness to support me throughout this thesis. Dr. Carolyn Brooks, thank you for being my co-supervisor – I am truly grateful I walked into your honours seminar in undergrad. Thank you for your patience, support, encouragement, mentorship, and endless advice and wisdom throughout the years. As well, thank you to E-Jay, Molly, Zola, and Reacher, for being some of the best pawsitive supports.

I would like to thank my One Health office cohort for their support, I couldn’t have asked for a better group of people to be surrounded by. I would like to thank Drs. Holly McKenzie and Barb Fornssler for their continued friendship, support, and mentorship in my academic journey. Additionally, thank you to Dr. Michael Gertler for your continued support and chats on everything related to sociology of agriculture.

I want to acknowledge the funding I received from Social Science and Humanities Research Council.

To my friends and family thank you for your support. A special thanks to Caelyn, Kimberley, Alexandria, Maryellen, Grace, Jelena, Taylor, and Colten for reminding me life exists beyond my thesis. Importantly, a thank you to my animals who inspired this research - Scooter, Twister, and Tornado.
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Chapter 1: Introduction
Saskatchewan has some of the highest rates of female reported intimate partner violence (IPV) in Canada (1,099 per 100,000), with women experiencing IPV at a rate 4.2 times higher than the national average (Statistics Canada 2021). For the purpose of this thesis, IPV is defined as violence used to control an intimate partner such as emotional, sexual, and physical abuse (World Health Organization 2013). Adding to this, Statistics Canada (2021) reports the rates of IPV in rural areas are 1.8 times that in urban areas. Importantly, Statistics Canada (2021) only includes cases reported to the police, so these values are likely underestimates. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic also meant people spent more time living and working at home, facing new and stressful situations, and those living with IPV were at the forefront of concern for related service providers (Statistics Canada 2022).

This thesis presents literature and reports specific to women who live in rural Saskatchewan and have experienced IPV. Research demonstrates animals can provide support to individuals experiencing stressful situations, such as those experienced with IPV (Applebaum, MacLean, and McDonald 2021; O’Haire et al. 2019). This support is tied to the bond that forms between the human and their animal, i.e., the human-animal bond. The human animal bond is defined by the American Veterinary Medical Association (2017) as “a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors considered essential to the health and wellbeing of both. The bond includes, among other things, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, animals and the environment” (para. 1). As well, throughout this thesis the terms pet and companion animal are used to recognize smaller animals which live within the home (e.g. cats, dog, etc), while the term farm
animal is used to recognize animals who are not raised or acquired with the intention of being pets (e.g., horses, cows, etc).

Numerous studies show the importance of the human-animal bond in the lives of people who have animals (Chalmers et al. 2020; Walsh 2009; Anna-Belle and Dell 2015; Stern et al. 2013), the health benefits of having animals in people’s lives, and the benefits of animal-inclusive policies and interventions (Chalmers and Dell 2015; Lalonde, Dell, and Claypool 2020; Nimer and Lundahl 2007; Fine 2019). Animals can improve mental health concerns, support those dealing with addictions, help reduce stress during times of stressful situations, provide a non-judgemental presence, and provide comfort during traumatic and stressful events (Williamson et al. 2021; Cole and Gawlinski 2002; Mills et al. 2014; Applebaum et al. 2021).

This project is a secondary analysis of data from a larger tri-provincial project conducted through the RESOLVE research network (Nixon, n.d.). This parent project is discussed in further detail in the methodology chapter. Chapter 1 introduces the topic of this thesis along with its purpose, rationale, and goals.

1.1 About the Thesis

This thesis has two main goals: 1) to gain understanding about how service providers and women with rural IPV experience understand the roles of animals while seeking help for IPV and 2) to contribute to the gap in current knowledge regarding animals and rural IPV to help improve services, policies, and programming for those who have animal concerns and are looking to leave a rural IPV relationship.

By analyzing focus group discussions with service providers and interviews with women who have lived experiences of rural IPV, this thesis explores the roles animals play in these
women’s lives and the barriers and supports they present for women seeking help for rural IPV.

One main research question guides the direction of this thesis: what roles (if any) do animals, pet or farm, play for rural women when seeking help for IPV? As there are two key components to this thesis, corresponding questions are applied to the respective participant groups:

1. How do service providers see the role of animals in the lives of these women?
2. How do women in rural areas see this role in their lives?

These research questions were developed based on the design of the parent study, Responding to Women Who Experience IPV in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies, and the recognized gap in literature found during the initial literature review stage of that project.

1.2 Rationale

In the context of the RESOLVE tri-provincial rural IPV study that included consideration of the importance of animals, both farm and pet, and a literature, it became apparent limited work focused on the importance of animals for women who seek help for rural IPV in Saskatchewan (Giesbrecht 2021a; Giesbrecht 2021b; Wuerch et al. 2020; Wuerch et al. 2018; Wuerch et al. 2017). Based on this literature review and the statistics presented above, the research questions for this thesis project were conceptualized to help fill the gap in research around this important aspect of rural IPV.

1.3 Outline of Thesis

Chapter 2 of this thesis summarizes current and relevant literature on linkages between the human-animal bond, rural IPV, and the contexts of animals within IPV relationships. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first discusses the relevant literature regarding IPV within the context of rural areas including family, farm, and livestock responsibilities that may
be factors in IPV for women in rural areas. The second section delves into the literature about the human-animal bond and the role of animals within IPV.

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework surrounding this thesis. Anti-oppressive feminist theory is introduced to explore the impact of gender and rurality on the experiences of women seeking help in rural Saskatchewan. Anti-oppressive feminist theory keeps the voices of those who have experienced rural IPV at the forefront of this research and recognizes the women as experts in their own experiences.

Chapter 4 reviews the methodological framework, overview of the parent study, research questions and discussion on constructivist grounded theory. This thesis implements constructivist grounded theory alongside the aforementioned anti-oppressive feminist theory to highlight researcher reflexivity and ground the findings in the experiences and voices of women who experience rural IPV. Anti-oppressive feminist theory understands knowledge can be derived from experiences and these experiences are shaped based on intersecting oppressions (Moosa-Mitha 2015; Trinder 2000) Constructivist grounded theory allows for a nuanced understanding of women’s experiences and provides for important social and cultural understanding and how these further impact help-seeking for IPV in these rural areas.

Chapters 5 and 6 present the findings from service provider focus groups and individual survivor interviews, respectively. Chapter 5 is divided into two sections. The first focuses on the findings of service providers and the barriers and experiences they note regarding the importance of animals for women who are seeking help for rural IPV. Next, this chapter discusses the implications of these findings. The service provider chapter is placed as such to provide a macro understanding of current services and policies to further contextualize the
experiences of women. Chapter 6 is divided into two sections as well. The first section outlines the findings from the interviews with women who experienced rural IPV who also had animal considerations. The second discusses the findings and implications related to the literature and similarities to the findings from the focus group. While the data from service providers and women are looked at in separate chapters, together, their understandings help to create the final chapter which presents the implications stemming from the research findings, recommendations for future research, and policy recommendations.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Throughout Canada, approximately 70% of IPV is not reported to police (Canadian Women’s Foundation 2016), suggesting the need to increase IPV services and research. Rural women within Canada experience the highest overall police-reported IPV rate at 743 per 100,000 (Burczycka 2018; Nixon n.d.); this is 1.8 times higher than those living in urban areas (Statistics Canada 2019). In 2019, rates of IPV against women aged 15 and over in remote Saskatchewan (4,017 per 100,000) appeared to account for the overall high IPV rates within the province, as rates in urban areas remained close to other provincial averages (445 per 100,000) (Conroy 2021; Burczycka 2022). Saskatchewan’s high rates of IPV within rural and remote areas are more than double the national rural and remote IPV average (1,705) (Burczycka 2022). These statistics are alarming, yet research focusing on rural IPV appears to be less prevalent than research on urban IPV.

High rates of non-reporting and higher than national average IPV rates highlight the need for further research on the experience of female IPV survivors within rural Saskatchewan. Statistics Canada provides two separate definitions of the term “rural”: “rural and small town” with populations under 10,000 and “census rural” with populations under 1,000 (Bollman and Clemonson 2008; Nixon, n.d.). According to the 2011 census, 38% of Saskatchewan’s population lived within a census rural area, making up part of the 19% of the general Canadian population who live within census rural areas (Statistics Canada 2015; Nixon n.d). The needs, experiences, and social contexts of rural women differ from those in urban areas (Wuerch et al. 2017) and should be represented in research studies. Within this chapter, the literature with respect to
two main areas of importance to this research is discussed: rural IPV, and animals in relation to IPV and the importance of the human-animal bond.

2.1 Understanding Rural IPV

IPV against women is endemic to most areas within society, with some populations of women more at risk of experiencing violence. Indigenous women and those living within rural areas are among these groups (Nixon n.d.). Edwards (2015) found women who experienced IPV within a rural context were at risk for increased difficulty accessing services, leading to poorer health, a greater severity of IPV, and increased rates of homicide. Discouraging and undermining attitudes towards seeking help and medical assistance for IPV are frequently linked to higher rates of substance use, unemployment, and living contexts (Nixon n.d.; Jackson et al. 2007; Edwards 2015). Three prevailing societal norms within rural communities help to explain these findings (Edwards 2015; Wendt 2009; Little 2017; Faller et al. 2018; Nixon n.d.). First, rural communities often have high levels of community cohesion, lending to a lack of privacy (Little 2017; Edwards 2015). Second, traditional gender roles are often prevalent within rural communities, including negative views of the discussion of personal matters outside of the home (Little 2017; Nixon n.d.; Edwards 2015). Third, a lack of available transportation, either public or personal vehicles, can contribute to further isolation of these women (Nixon n.d.; Little 2017; Edwards 2015; Faller et al. 2018).

Some key factors related to the lower numbers of women seeking help for rural IPV stem from the higher rates of substance abuse and poverty, fewer accessible resources, presence of patriarchal familial structures, and strong identification with one’s land and animals (Edwards 2015; Wendt 2009, 2016). DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009) found that collective community
attitudes may function to both encourage or discourage victims from seeking help, especially when those who perpetrate IPV are prominent members of a close-knit community (Edwards 2015; Nixon n.d.). The presence of a strong sense of community in rural areas increases the invisibility of IPV within rural households and surrounding communities (Little 2017), as women fear repercussions from reporting IPV and loss of their social network (Barton et al. 2015; Nixon, n.d.). A reluctance to seek help for IPV stemming from the above social factors can lead to an increase in feelings of social isolation, compounding the fact rural women already experience higher levels of isolation and loneliness (Faller et al. 2018; DeKeseredy et al. 2016; Wendt 2016; Nixon n.d.).

Forsdick-Martz and Sarauer (2001) interviewed female IPV survivors and service providers in rural Saskatchewan and found survivors would often stay in an IPV relationship due to self-blame, fear, and the normalization of abuse (Nixon n.d.). Those who wanted to seek help were often unaware of available resources and how to access them. Lack of resources often required these women to travel greater distances to access supports, therefore presenting them with barriers related to childcare, employment issues, and access to transportation (Forsdick-Martz and Sarauer 2001; Wendt 2016; Nixon n.d.). Wuerch et al. (2016a) found women in IPV relationships in rural areas did not always access resources even when such resources were presented. In some instances, women were unaware how to access available resources, even if they had lived in these small communities their entire lives. Individuals also expressed reluctance to seek support from local services due to potential issues regarding confidentiality (Wuerch et al. 2017).
Higher levels of loneliness and isolation have left female IPV victims feeling alone in their experiences (Faller et al. 2018; Nixon n.d.). Lack of emotional support and social and geographical isolation can result in a victim of IPV being more easily manipulated and controlled (Wisniewski, Arseneault, and Paquet 2019; Kasdorff and Erb 2010; Nixon n.d.). As leaving an abusive situation in a rural setting often results in leaving behind friends, family, and community, the limited emotional supports that some women have can be lost by leaving (Wuerch et al. 2016a). In addition, the lack of resources and police services in rural areas poses a further barrier to victims of rural IPV. Royal Canadian Mounted Police and other police detachments are often not located within every rural community. This can result in longer wait times for intervention and, in times of poor weather and road conditions, police may not be able to respond until long after the original call (Fraehlich 2014; Nixon n.d.).

These long wait times are most relevant to rural and remote locations and can disproportionately affect Indigenous populations. Within the Canadian context, many Indigenous women reside in First Nations communities located in remote, often northern, areas (Brownridge 2003; Klingspohn 2018; Nixon n.d.). Indigenous people account for 11.7% of Saskatchewan’s population, and approximately half of Canada’s Indigenous population resides outside an urban center (Burczycka 2018). Research consistently finds that Indigenous women are at greater risk of experiencing IPV (Brownridge 2009; Boyce 2014 Nixon n.d.). While Indigenous women account for 4% of Canadian women, 10% report being a victim of IPV (Statistics Canada 2016; Tutty et al. 2020). Moreover, the General Social Survey (GSS) reported Indigenous women were three times more likely than non-Indigenous women to experience IPV (Burczycka 2016). These significant statistics indicate Indigenous women living within the prairie...
provinces are at much greater risk of IPV than those in other areas of Canada (Faller et al. 2018). Within Canada, leaving an IPV situation is often a primary solution posed to women who have access to supports such as police interventions, crisis lines, and transitional housing (Smye et al. 2020), but these are often not found or supported within rural or First Nation communities (Nixon n.d.; Rizkalla et al. 2020; Faller et al. 2018). For Indigenous individuals, the lack of culturally sensitive services and interventions pose unique barriers to those seeking support for IPV (Faller et al. 2018).

2.1.1 How IPV is viewed within rural areas
IPV within rural and remote areas has been acknowledged and understood through the understanding of a social acceptance of silence regarding violence (Campbell 2007; Kuokkanen 2015; McGillivray & Commaskey 1999; Shepherd 2001; Fikowski and Moffitt 2017). McGillivray and Commaskey (1999) discuss this normalization of silence as a barrier to women trying to leave IPV relationships and suggest this understanding exists not only on the smaller level between individuals but within the larger community as well. This normalization of silence within communities can be traced back through generations, reinforcing intergenerational violence (Wendt and Hornosty 2010; Cotter 2021).

This culture of violence presents further challenges for women when trying to access safekeeping (DeKeseredy et al. 2016). Many describe their negative experience with supports, including their stories not being believed when disclosed or a normalization of their experiences and abuse (Kohtala 2021; Riddell et al. 2009). Normalizing IPV in rural areas by fellow community members and people in positions of power, such as police and religious leaders, reinforces the feelings of self-blame women report feeling as a result of the isolation and culture in rural areas (Riddel et al. 2009; Kohtala 2021; Nixon n.d.). The lack of
acknowledgement and awareness can be traced back to the societal context and stigma surrounding IPV within rural areas. While women may disclose to close contacts, such as friends or others within their community, these individuals may be reluctant to discuss or help the women due to this normalization and community beliefs that matters such as IPV should be kept private (Riddell et al. 2009; Beyer et al. 2013; Kohtala 2021; Nixon n.d.). Silencing this conversation not only reinforces this culture of normalization and self-blame cycle, but contributes to the understanding that IPV is a ‘family matter’ to be dealt with in private (Wendt and Hornosty 2010; Evans and Feder 2014; Kohtala 2021).

Privacy is highly valued within rural communities and there is an expectation that issues such as IPV will be dealt with inside the home and family unit (Beyer et al. 2013). Fear of embarrassment or bringing shame to their families is often a consideration for those living in a community where blame is often shifted to victims if their leaving were to break up the family or break the family silence (Logan et al. 2003; Wendt and Horonsty 2010; Kohtala 2021; Nixon n.d.). This shifting of blame means, at times, victims will downplay the severity of their abuse to maintain the status quo, and they themselves often hold these same values and try to prioritize family unity (Wendt and Horonsty 2010; Doherty and Horonty 2016). These views form out of the traditional family and gender views and roles, where women should keep their families together for the sake of their children (Wendt and Horonsty 2010). Coupled with the IPV normalization culture in rural areas, women are being held accountable for not only how to handle the violence against them but also the impacts these decisions will have on their family and children (Wendt and Horonsty 2010; Beyer et al. 2013).
2.1.2 Farm, family, and farm animal responsibilities
Farm families often contend with life-altering and stability-threatening events, such as droughts and storms that can damage and impact the health of crops, and/or diseases and other natural disasters that can impact the health of livestock and other farm animals. These stressors can impact a family’s ability to cope with violence and places additional stressors on those living with IPV (Wendt and Horonsty 2010; Nixon n.d.). Farms, regardless of size, require a significant amount of time, energy, and finances. Farm work is often labour intensive, and tending to a farm can result in greater contact with the abuser, leading to an increase in potentially dangerous situations (Doherty and Horonty 2016; Kohatla 2021). As Wendt and Hornosty (2010) mention, leaving the farm not only uproots the individual from their home and livelihood, but also their sense of identity – something service providers may not be able to fully understand. This attachment to the farm is something that can be used against women as a form of control; others feel pressured to stay for the sake of the farm (Wendt and Hornosty, 2010; Nixon n.d.).

As many women are financially tied to their farms and can have a lack of off-farm employment, they may have concerns about how they will financially be able to afford to leave (Riddell et al. 2009). Riddell et al. (2009) highlight that, due to the nature of farm work, women may not be eligible for financial help from programs such as Employment Insurance, and any debt owed on the farm could further complicate their ability to leave. Therefore, remaining in an abusive relationship may seem to be the best way to maintain financial stability, protect their investment, and potentially secure their children’s financial future (Wendt and Hornosty, 2010; Doherty and Horonty 2016).
For some farms, part of the investment, both emotionally and financially, relates to the care of any animals. Many women who live and work on farms may find it difficult to leave IPV due to their responsibilities to farm animals. Leaving behind their animals may not be viewed as a viable option and they may choose to stay because of their responsibilities in this respect (Fraehlich 2014; Hornosty and Doherty, 2003).

Due to the labour-intensive nature of farm work, it is both physically and financially difficult to care for farm animals alone (Kasdorff and Erb 2010; Giesbrecht 2021). Police intervention could result in one person not being allowed to return to the farm to help with the operations. This, in turn, could destabilize the farming operations and the care and well-being of farm animals (Kasdorff and Erb, 2010). As shared within Giesbrecht (2021), a counsellor discussed how leaving the farm could lead to harm or neglect of farm animals, discussing how in their experience those who are experiencing IPV on farms are also the individuals who do the labour to care for animals and should they leave, the animals will no longer have care. Such considerations further add to the stressors and considerations for women experiencing IPV in rural areas.

Animals are also frequently abused by those who commit IPV (Ascione et al. 2007; Barrett et al. 2018, 2020; Stevenson et al. 2018; Collins et al. 2018; Fitzgerald et al. 2020). As such, women leaving IPV relationships may have concerns for the safety of the farm animals if they were to leave them in the care of their violent partner (Kasdorff and Erb, 2010). As raising farm animals or poultry is a considerable emotional and financial investment, a connection is developed through the care (i.e., feeding and medical care), making it difficult to leave animals behind without knowing they are safe and that their care needs will be met (Kasdorff & Erb,
Farm animals pose further complications as the needs vary depending on the types and number of animals (Giesbrecht 2021). As a farm cannot be left unattended for more than half a day, Kasdorff and Erb (2010) state this time constraint can present yet another challenge when trying to access services which require time away from the farm, as someone needs to be on farm to care for and feed animals.

For many, farm animals are viewed as part of the family and their safety and well-being are a priority (Kasdorff and Erb 2010). However, many violence shelters are unable to accommodate even small pets. Lack of accommodations means many animals are not able to accompany someone to a shelter and must remain behind. To leave behind an animal can be similar to leaving behind a family member and adds another layer off loss and stress to women and their children who are leaving an IPV situation (Kasdorff & Erb, 2010; Giesbrecht 2021). Losing access to these animals, and the emotional support they provide, compounds the loss and changes that many women and children experience (Giesbrecht 2021). Those faced with the decision to remain with their animals or leave are aware that leaving animals behind puts those animals at risk of harm (Giesbrecht 2021). Because of this, many women choose to remain and often do not report their abuse (Kasdorff & Erb, 2010).

2.2 The Role of Animals within IPV and the Human-Animal Bond

Before understanding the roles animals and the human-animal bond have within IPV, it is important to recognize a difference in literature regarding farm and companion animals. While participants in previous IPV research have understood their farm animals as providing similar supports as companion animals, historically, the literature around the human-animal relationship does not recognize this support as being equivalent. Companion animal literature often discusses the importance of the bond that forms between a person and their pet within
the individual’s everyday life, as well as the overall benefits individuals gain from this relationship (Chalmers et al. 2020; Chalmers and Dell 2015; Hodgson et al. 2015; O’Haire et al. 2019). However, when looking at literature focused on farm animals in relation to the individual, the interaction is understood to be less of a bond and more of a transactional relationship focused largely on improving the overall quality of life of farm animals (Cornu 2009; Mota-Rojas et al. 2020). This quality of life is often discussed in terms of production and rarely in terms of a meaningful and supportive bond between the individual and animal (Rault et al. 2020; Waiblinger et al. 2006; Zulkifli 2013; Mota-Rojas et al. 2020). Further, literature on human and farm animal relations is often viewed in connection to large scale production methods and staffing, rather than on a more micro interaction level, a level previous IPV research has started to focus on. Grounding the relationship between the person and farm-animal in a production-based relationship emphasizes the impartiality within this relationship — even though research suggests a closer human-animal relationship translates into improved animal welfare (Anthony 2003). Although literature is limited on the human-animal bond regarding farm animals, this thesis recognizes the experiences women have with farm animals may go against the current understanding of the human-farm animal relationship.

Research exploring barriers to accessing IPV services has been increasing in recent years, yet the roles and importance of animals within the lives of those who experience IPV in rural areas remains largely understudied. However, two key studies in this area have been conducted by Wuerch et al. (2017, 2018) and focus on the importance of animals within safekeeping as well as the importance of farm animals for rural women. These studies highlight how the human-animal bond takes shape in a multitude of different ways, such as presenting a barrier
to leaving due to fear of harm coming to the animals and the possibility of farm animals acting as a source comfort to those experience IPV (Wuerch et al. 2017; O’Haire et al. 2019; Collins et al. 2018; Doherty and Hornesty 2008; Fraehlich 2014).

Many women leaving IPV situations in Saskatchewan state that the safety of their animals is a factor in their decision to leave or not (Wuerch et al. 2016b; Phillips 2018). Wuerch et al. (2017) found 71% of respondents stated concern for their companion animal and/or farm animal safety was a large factor related to leaving an IPV relationship. For these women, companion animals offer a constant presence, providing comfort and support during difficult times (O’Haire et al. 2019). For many women, their animals are a non-judgmental support that provides unconditional companionship and can help provide social interaction, if the animal is one with socialization needs (Fine 2015; Suthers-McCabe 2001; O’Haire et al. 2019).

Key themes found within the literature on IPV and animals show many women do not want to leave their pets behind as this causes unnecessary stress to women and children (Collins et al. 2018; Wuerch et al. 2016b). The human-animal bond drives this concern and prevents some women from being able to engage in comprehensive and effective safety planning because, in some IPV situations, animals can be used as a tool for coercion (Collins et al. 2018; Fitzgerald et al. 2019; McDonald et al. 2017). This form of control can take different forms, including physical abuse (drowning, beating, cutting off ears, kicking etc.) and neglect (Arkow 2019; Wuerch et al. 2017). Specific animals that have closer bonds or relationships with the abused are often targeted first as they offer the best form of emotional manipulation and control (DeKay 2019). Service providers who work with women have provided evidence they are aware of the dilemma animal safekeeping presents when leaving IPV (Wuerch et al. 2016b). However, a
disconnect between animal welfare agencies and human service providers is apparent. Human service providers frequently mention how the safety of animals has a large impact on the women they serve, yet animal welfare agencies report they are rarely contacted for help with safekeeping or temporary care and expressed an interest in learning more about providing this support (Wuerch et al. 2016b).

Farm animals have the potential to develop significant relationships with women IPV victims (Fraehlich 2014; Nixon n.d.); however, literature surrounding IPV and farm animals, such as poultry, horses, cows, and other farm animals, is especially limited. Wuerch et al. (2018) is one of the few articles discussing both the harm that can come to farm animals and what that means financially for individuals trying to leave IPV. As farm animals are often a source of income for women in rural areas, many are unable to leave IPV due to their animal care responsibilities and may chose to remain for this reason (Fraehlich 2014; Doherty and Hornesty 2008; Wuerch et al. 2016; Nixon n.d.). A higher level of difficulty is associated with farm animal safekeeping due to the size and number of animals (DeKay 2019). Moreover, under the law, farm animals are considered a form of property, creating issues regarding ownership especially if the farm animals provide a source of income, resulting in ownership becoming an issue of settlement if a couple is separating (DeKay 2019; Lovell 2016). Unfortunately, farm animals are largely exempt from the same legal protection offered to pets, adding to the potential financial stress of leaving (Lovell 2016). For example, in Saskatchewan, industry compliance regarding the sale and transportation of farm animals is overseen by the Livestock Services of Saskatchewan (LSS) using brands as the main form of identification (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023). However, unless an animal has been reported missing or stolen and is
branded with a registered brand, the likelihood of an animal being returned to its rightful owner is limited.

Wuerch et al. (2018) identified financial resources as a significant barrier to the safekeeping of animals when leaving an IPV situation. The financial resources required for safekeeping efforts include, for example, the cost of kennels for smaller pets or boarding facilities for larger farm animals. As the cost of a boarding facility can be high, one of the few remaining options regarding placement of farm animals when leaving IPV is a stockyard. As a stockyard is generally used to house farm animals for shipping and slaughter (Foran 2004), this is a less than ideal location to board an animal with which one has an emotional relationship or that may be a source of income, possibly adding to the stress of leaving IPV (Wuerch et al. 2017). When considering the human-animal bond during times of abuse, service providers including human service agencies, domestic violence shelters, and humane societies spoke to the difficulty of making the decision of seeking safety through shelter services. In particular, the inability to find care for their animals often prevented victims from accessing shelter services (Wuerch et al. 2017).

The literature regarding the impact of animals on rural women’s decisions to seek help is limited. However, the current literature speaks to the many levels of importance animals have for women living within rural IPV. This importance, combined with Saskatchewan’s high rate of IPV and women’s increased anxiety risk, depression, and low self-esteem (Anderson, Renner, and Danis 2012), highlights the importance of continuing to work towards understanding the importance of animals within IPV.

2.3 Conclusion
In summary, statistics show the rate of rural IPV is substantially higher than urban IPV within the prairie provinces of Canada. As 38% of Saskatchewan’s population resides within a rural area (Bollman and Clemonson 2008), further research within the area of rural IPV is needed to help address the barriers and challenges women face when seeking help for IPV (Wuerch et al. 2017, 2018, 2019).

Literature on rural IPV shows those in rural areas face significant barriers to accessing support services. Financial considerations, isolation, distance to services, potential farm and animal considerations, as well as a normalization of IPV in rural areas all contribute towards difficulties accessing help and ultimately prolong women’s experiences of violence. Further, the discouragement and undermining attitudes towards seeking help and even medical assistance for IPV have been frequently linked to higher rates of substance abuse, unemployment, and living contexts, further compounding the already difficult barriers faced by women living in rural contexts. The lack of privacy within smaller communities and mentality of dealing with IPV within the family are further issues related to help-seeking in rural areas.

In some cases, the aforementioned barriers are further compounded by the addition of animal care and safekeeping concerns. Raising farm animals requires significant emotional and financial investment, while companion animals, such as cats and dogs, typically form a bond with people. This human-animal bond represents another layer of concern for women as their animals can potentially be used as tools of coercion; the risk of harm, and at times loss of income, needs to be considered within safekeeping plans. For many they perceive their animals to be one of the only true non-judgmental supports willing to provide unconditional companionship and social interaction during difficult times.
Chapter 3: Theory
This chapter describes the use of anti-oppressive feminist theory and constructivist grounded theory to provide a lens through which to understand the experiences of women who have experienced IPV within rural areas. These theories demonstrate how women’s experiences are best understood by understanding their words as truths, acknowledging the links between oppressions in their lives, and acknowledging voices that have traditionally been overlooked.

Understanding the autonomy, strength, and courage women hold within their individual lives means they are truly the only ones who understand and know their lived realities (Rupra 2010).

As this study is qualitative and focused on understanding the perspectives of rural women and service providers with respect to the importance of animals in IPV help-seeking, the epistemological foundation of this anti-oppressive feminist framework helps to understand participant experiences in relation to their social position. The epistemological foundation of anti-oppressive theories reflects the understanding of the participants as being the experts whose subjective experiences are valid (Wuest 1995). Anti-oppressive feminist theory also provides a focused lens during data gathering, analysis, and interpretation, through which to understand these participants’ experiences when seeking help for rural IPV and the roles their animals play within these decisions.

3.1 Anti-oppressive Feminist Theory
An anti-oppressive feminist perspective is necessary to provide an understanding of the unique insights, experiences, and perspectives of the women and service providers participating in this study. This feminist approach is grounded within an anti-oppressive, nonviolent, and socially focused feministic stance (Moosa-Mitha 2015). An anti-oppressive perspective goes beyond the limitations of viewing oppression based on one social identity to a
more encompassing view, where the analysis focuses on the intersectionality of oppression due to numerous marginalized identities (Dominelli 2011; Moosa-Mitha 2015). Importantly, within anti-oppressive work, intersectionality incorporates different oppressions due to both relational and structural marginalization (Moosa-Mitha 2015). Therefore, this inclusion of intersectionality seeks to find oppressions as they relate to structural, political, and social levels within our society. In doing so, anti-oppressive theories then resist the understanding of universal truths, instead focusing on experiential truths voiced by those who have lived experiences within different forms of marginalization (Burke and Harrison 2002). Anti-oppressive theory examines how different social identities shape individuals’ lives and understanding of experiences while acknowledging women’s agency and the power they themselves hold. Simultaneously, anti-oppressive theory views oppression through both conceptual and empirical analyses (Dustin and Montgomery 2010; Moosa-Mitha 2015). This allows research to view the normative social and institutional practices that marginalize women, while allowing for an analysis of research participants who reside within these relationships. Women who have lived experience of IPV within rural areas are able to speak to living within a marginalized group while also maintaining knowledge of mainstream society.

The last decade has seen a shift from second-wave to third-wave feminist theories (George and Smith 2014). This third-wave feminist approach is largely grounded within this anti-oppressive, nonviolent, and socially focused feministic stance (Moosa-Mitha 2015). Anti-oppressive theories represent what has become known as a second movement of social theories (Moosa-Mitha 2015). These works go beyond the limitations of viewing oppression based on one social identity, to a more encompassing view where the analysis focuses on the
multiplicity and intersectionality of oppression – due to numerous marginalized identities (Dominelli 2011; Moosa-Mitha 2015). The two main components to the social justice vision of this anti-oppressive theory are examining how differential social identities shape individuals’ lives (Dustin & Montgomery, 2010; Moosa-Mitha 2015) and looking at oppression through a conceptual and empirical analysis (Dustin & Montgomery, 2010; Moosa-Mitha 2015).

Injustice is understood as resulting from an individual’s perceived deviation from the societal norm – shown through societal relationships that are characterized by power imbalances (Moosa-Mitha 2015). Using this theoretical approach requires researchers to understand and respond to the oppression faced by women who experience trauma (Bermea et al. 2019). Anti-oppressive third-wave feminism replaces the understanding within second-wave feminism of all women sharing similar experiences with a more inclusive understanding of society (George and Stith 2014). Third-wave feminism understands that while all women share one commonality, all social classes, sexual orientations, and races have had their experiences shaped based on their social positions; this brings third-wave feminism to a more intersectional understanding (Cohen 2005; George and Smith 2014).

Anti-oppression alone refers to theories and actions that work to challenge the inequalities and injustices that are ingrained within society and institutions by policies and practices (Bermea et al. 2019). An anti-oppressive framework works under the assumption of a pre-existing level of power and privilege, resulting in unequal access to services and treatment (Bermea et al. 2019). An understanding of how oppression affects those involved on cultural and structural levels is crucial (Moosa-Mitha 2015).
Natural themes have emerged from the literature on anti-oppressive feminist theory. Foremost, the reflection process plays an important role within the anti-oppression framework (Rupra 2010). Within this is the ability to understand how the researcher’s lived experiences and biased interpretations of the research findings impact the written results (Rupra 2010). As a researcher and graduate student studying at the University of Saskatchewan, there is an inherent power imbalance between researcher and participant provided to the researcher by the role occupied, while doing qualitative research at a post-secondary institution. As well, coming from a smaller community in Alberta, provided an outside lens to the systems of Saskatchewan yet allowed for some familiarity of the shared social contexts in the Canadian prairies. As such, IPV in small prairie communities has been a part of my life in various forms for many years. Further, an interest in the human-animal bond combined with the opportunity to work with RESOLVE on an important social issue, framed this thesis. Imperative within the anti-oppressive framework is the ability to remain accepting of other understandings, perspectives, and attitudes of the experiences found within the research. Institutions in which we live and work act as an influencing factor on our attitudes and beliefs, and an understanding thereof is required so researchers are aware of any potential bias this creates within their work and the interpretation of results (Rupra 2010).

An anti-oppressive feminist perspective is necessary to provide an understanding of the unique insights, experiences, and perspectives of both the women and service providers participating in this study. Mainly, the rurality of participants will be addressed as this theory recognizes the intersectionality of participants and how their geographic location interacts in conjunction with other factors such as gender and class. Rural areas often have gendered
dynamics distinct from those of urban areas (Wendt and Horonsty 2010; Doherty and Horonty 2016). This theoretical perspective goes beyond the limitations of viewing oppression based solely on one social identity to a more encompassing view where the analysis focuses on the intersectionality of oppression due to a variety of potential marginalized identities (Dominelli 2011; Moosa-Mitha 2015). This research is able to look at the social and institutional practices and experiences that shape the experiences and understanding of those who reside within these relationships (Dustin and Montgomery 2010; Moosa-Mitha 2015).

3.2 Constructivist Grounded Theory

Aspects of constructivist grounded theory were incorporated alongside the framework described in the theory chapter. Constructivist grounded theory was selected based on the general goal of understanding and increasing knowledge within an understudied area, in this instance within the context of animals and rural IPV (Jenny, Alaggia and Niepage 2016).

Constructivist grounded theory values subjective participant experiences (Charmaz 2006) and works upon the understanding that individuals act as autonomous individuals, rooted within symbolic interactionalism (Bryant & Charmaz 2007, Unsworth 2012). Unlike previous versions of grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory emphasizes the use of probing questions and critically views the research process and the individual researchers (Charmaz 2016).

Charmaz (2017) states that constructivist grounded theory centers the research process and final product in social and situational contexts. A constructivist grounded approach has been implemented to help recognize how women understand and conceive their life experiences (Charmaz 2006, Unsworth 2012). Following Charmaz (2005, 2006), the responses provided by women and service providers were understood as truths. For researchers to avoid
seeing their lived experiences through the research findings, they need to view participant perspectives as only one understanding among many (Charmaz 2006; Unsworth 2012). However, Charmaz (2006) warns what the researcher finds within the data is partially constructed based on the researcher’s perspectives. By acknowledging this, the researcher can recognize the influence they may have over their data and final research product (Unsworth 2012); such understandings are also shared by anti-oppressive theory.

These theories work symbiotically as grounded theory is argued to be inherently feminist (Clarke 2007). This understanding is based upon five different ideas outlined within Clarke’s *Feminisms, Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis* (2007). First, the basis of grounded theories in American symbolic interactionist sociology puts emphasis on lived experiences. Second, multiplicity, situatedness, and partiality are implemented. Third, there are assumptions of social constructionism. Fourth, there is a deconstructive analytical process. Fifth, attention is paid to the large ranges of variation that help to highlight differences (Clark 2007; Unsworth 2012).

Constructivist grounded theory allows for critical qualitative inquiry by letting research begin from a broad topic of interest and follow a set of research questions derived from issues within the subject (Charmaz 2017). This path allows constructivist grounded theory to provide a critical analysis of topics within social justice. Developed out of values promoting social justice, constructivist grounded theory provided the analytic tools to probe how events and outcomes are developed for individuals. Providing a method of studying marginality and inequality, constructivist grounded theory aids researchers in drawing out the meaning and understandings within participant discussions that are often buried in policies and
organizational understanding (Charmaz 2017). This style of inquiry allows for the critical questions within anti-oppressive work to be addressed while maintaining the standpoint of the research subject.

Following the constructivist grounded theory outlined by Charmaz (1995, 2000), the researcher must immerse themselves within the data through coding language intended to maintain the respondent’s life experiences at the forefront of analysis and prevent overshadowing experiences, centering scientific terms, and obscuring experiences (Charmaz 2000). Charmaz (2000) explains how researchers must seek meaning from participant data and look beyond the surface understanding of the data and towards the views, values, ideologies, beliefs, and situations of respondents and their implied meanings to clarify the views of participants and avoid challenging their realities. Doing so will prevent the researcher from identifying their own understandings within the collected data.

3.2 Conclusion

Implementing anti-oppressive feminist theory provides a comprehensive lens for this research. This helps to acknowledge the experiences of participants and include an understanding of the significance of including animals within research and our thinking as participants speak to the roles animals had during their IPV relationships (Taylor and Fraser 2019). In doing so, participants are recognized as the experts regarding their experiences and whose subjective experiences are valid (Wuest 1995). Applying an anti-oppressive lens to this research provides guidance with respect to viewing the lived experiences of participants as truths. As anti-oppressive feminist theory is an approach grounded with a socially focused understanding,
universal truths are rejected, and participant experiences can be contextualized and viewed within their relation to social identities (Moosa-Mitha 2015).
Chapter 4: Methodology and Analysis

This chapter discusses the research process for the parent study, *Responding to Women Who Experience IPV in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies*, as well as the use of anti-oppressive feminist theory and constructivist grounded theory within this project. The research questions are then stated, followed by a description of the sample used for this research and the qualitative and constructivist grounded theory methods employed in data analysis. Ethical considerations along with the strengths and limitations of this project are also presented.

The two frameworks, constructivist grounded theory and anti-oppressive feminist theory, are complementary. Constructivist grounded theory does not take into consideration ethical issues at all stages of research; the anti-oppressive feminist framework helps to fill this gap while allowing for researcher reflexivity and a focus on participant knowledge (Charmaz 2005, 2006). This requires the knowledge held by the researcher to be challenged and for the participant knowledge to lead the research process. As such, the opportunity to work with RESOLVE data presented itself while also incorporating my interest in the human-animal bond within this thesis topic. This resulted in having a more focused interested in the discussion around animals and IPV within the interviews.

Qualitative methods are a common way to collect data within IPV research (Wuerch et al. 2017). Using interviews helps to understand the lived experiences of populations who are otherwise left out of conversations. A qualitative approach is also suited for understanding individual experiences when little is known about the area (Nixon n.d.; Creswell and Poth 2018; Strauss and Corbin 1990). This methodology was used by the *Responding to Women Who Experience IPV in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies* initiative as an effective way to answer
specific research questions while allowing for a contextualized understanding of participant experiences (Nixon n.d.).

Within the *Responding to Women Who Experience IPV in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies* initiative, interviews were combined with an environmental scan and Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis of current services accessible in rural areas for women who experience IPV (Nixon n.d.). This study included a literature review of the experiences of rural women survivors of IPV within Canada, with a focus on the prairie provinces. The literature review was not limited to academic work but was expanded to include current grey literature on rural women’s experiences when seeking help for IPV as well as the experiences of service providers who offer IPV services to rural women (Nixon n.d.).

Women were recruited through notices posted online on agency webpages and social media, and distributed through community agencies that offer services to rural women for IPV (Nixon n.d.). Participants were asked about their experience as victims of IPV, experiences with seeking help (including challenges, gaps, and barriers they experienced), and recommendations to help improve IPV services (Nixon n.d.).

Focus groups were conducted with service providers from rural communities as well as other government and IPV agencies that provide services to women from rural areas (e.g., victim services, women’s resource centers, RCMP, shelters) (Nixon n.d.). Service providers were asked about their perceptions of rural women’s experiences as victims of IPV, women’s help-seeking and the gaps, barriers, and challenges they notice are faced by rural women when seeking help, and recommendations to help improve responses to IPV experienced by rural women (Nixon n.d.).
4.1 Current Study

This project focuses on participants from the Saskatchewan portion of the tri-provincial
Responding to Women Who Experience IPV in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies initiative
who mentioned or discussed having to care for animals and the human-animal relationship.
Access to the aforementioned study allowed for a secondary analysis of service provider and
survivor participants willing to discuss their experiences and understandings of rural IPV. To
answer the proposed research questions, qualitative interviews, and focus group data from
both service providers and individual IPV female survivors were analyzed.

Interviews with these select aforementioned rural women from the Responding to
Women Who Experience IPV in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies initiative helped to
understand the women’s perspective regarding the importance of animals when seeking help
for rural IPV and how these considerations impacted their ability or decision to seek help. These
interviews helped to provide an understanding of the significance of the human-animal bond
from the perspective of survivors who have experienced IPV and how this bond supported
women and in some instances children through difficult life changes.

Focus groups with service providers allowed for an in-depth understanding of how
service providers view the roles of animals within the lives of rural women, and if care for
animals is considered a factor when rural women seek help for IPV. These focus groups
highlighted what services exist, and what changes and supports are necessary to help support
the human-animal bond throughout the help-seeking process. Including the perspectives of
both service providers and rural women was done to provide a more complete understanding
of the role of animals in the lives of rural women during help-seeking.
4.2 Research Questions

This project aims to understand the role of pet and farm animals when rural women seek help for IPV, and how service providers understand this role. This thesis investigates one main research question: what roles (if any) do animals, pet or farm, play for rural women when seeking help for IPV? Two corresponding questions are then applied to the respective participant groups:

1. How do service providers see this role in the lives of these women?
2. How do women in rural areas see this role in their lives?

4.3 Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

The Responding to Women Who Experience IPV in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies initiative was a multi-site study with data collection completed by researchers within RESOLVE along with academic partners from Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (Nixon n.d.). RESOLVE Saskatchewan conducted 13 individual qualitative interviews with female IPV survivors as well as two focus groups with service providers; questions regarding the importance of animals for women in rural IPV relations were included. These included questions such as if an individual was responsible for the care of animals, and if the care of animals made it difficult or harder to disclose or seek help for rural IPV. Please see Appendix A for an abridged interview guide focused on the animal specific questions. Of the 13 individual participants, 10 discussed caring for animals within their IPV relationship. Interview times ranged from approximately 45 minutes to approximately 2 hours. Participants were recruited via dissemination of research posters on social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter). Electronic research posters were submitted to Facebook and Instagram groups for northern and rural
communities and posters were uploaded to pages where others could easily see and share the image with those they knew. Electronic recruitment posters were also disseminated through the help of community partners.

During data collection, women and service providers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide to ensure consistency while allowing participants to discuss topics they felt were important and wanted included within the study. This methodology resulted in many participants expressing thanks for being able to tell their story in a non-judgmental setting, for the research team taking the time and interest in the topic, and for providing a platform for them to share their stories. Some participants commented that the process and interview went quickly, and they enjoyed completing the process.

4.4 Sample

Data from ten individual interviews with survivor participants and from both service provider focus groups were analyzed. Of the 13 total Saskatchewan survivor participants, these 10 were those who responded they did have to care for animals during the time of their violent relationship. To participate, women were required to be living away from their abusive partner for over a year. All participants identified as female and heterosexual, two identified as Indigenous and eight as Caucasian. However, data was not analyzed based on gender or ethnicity as this project was an exploratory study using a secondary analysis with a smaller dataset.

A total of 13 service providers participated across the two focus groups. Focus group participants represented a variety of services related to IPV across Saskatchewan, such as
second-stage shelters, animal welfare groups, police services, and other provincial agencies. Service providers were selected for the focus groups using convenience and snowball sampling.

4.5 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is considered a useful methodology when trying to understand an under-researched topic and the personal experiences of participants (Creswell and Poth 2016; Creswell and Poth 2018; Strauss and Corbin 1990). This methodology was used by the Responding to Women Who Experience IPV in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies initiative as an effective way to answer specific research questions while allowing for a contextualized understanding of participant experiences (Nixon n.d.).

To answer the two research questions for this thesis, qualitative interviews were coded and analyzed for emerging themes. As this project focuses on the perspectives of survivors and service providers within rural Saskatchewan regarding animals and safekeeping, experiences may be similar for other survivors and service providers within the province and country; however, the results cannot be generalized to a broader population.

4.7 Data Analysis

The Responding to Women Who Experience IPV in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies initiative was interested in answering a separate set of research questions, allowing this project to perform a concurrent secondary analysis. Doing so allowed this project to have an extra layer of analytic accountability as the parent project’s research analysis team members met weekly to review and discuss the data analysis process (Kardashevskaya et al. 2022). While these team members (two coders from Manitoba, two from Alberta) were not directly working
on this secondary analysis, their participation allowed for discussion around the coding for this project to be integrated into weekly meetings to support analysis and increase rigour as the team discussed their individual roles throughout the research process, how their experiences and assumptions shaped their understanding of the data, and how they were going about their coding process to ensure the team was maintaining consistency throughout the provinces.

Interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim into Word documents. These interviews and transcripts were completed by myself, as the research assistant hired for RESOLVE Saskatchewan. Notes were made during the interviews regarding thoughts, topics, and perceived emotions of participants as part of the reflective practices incorporated into this projects analysis. These notes allowed for documentation of the nuances in the interviews, allowing for more detailed accuracy of the transcripts. Transcripts were then uploaded to DeDoose, a data analysis software that assisted with data coding. Key themes and patterns were derived from interview data using thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998). This involved free coding collected data to saturation before any themes could be identified. Codes, ‘the smallest unit of analysis’ (Clarke & Braun 2017, p. 297), were assigned throughout the interviews until saturation (Kardashevskaya et al. 2021). After coding reached saturation, codes were be placed into categories with similar codes and then combined into themes, ‘a shared core idea’ (Clarke and Braun 2017; Kardashevskaya et al. 2021), for discussion (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Carmichael and Cunningham 2017). Each theme was then examined in relation to the research objectives to gain a better understanding about participant and service provider perceptions regarding their experiences (Boyatzis 1998). To increase rigour throughout the research process, codes and themes were reviewed with both the parent study’s research
analysis team and Dr. Karen Wood, the principal investigator on the parent study and committee member on this thesis.

Finally, research findings were linked to the specific research objectives. Major themes were highlighted with evidence supported by exact quotes given during the interviews (Braun and Clark 2006), with the names of participants changed for their security, safety, and confidentiality. During analysis, language used for coding was kept consistent with the language used within interviews and focus groups, to help maintain the nuances of participant experiences and limit researcher influence within the findings (Charmaz 2000).

4.8 Limitations

This study is subject to multiple limitations. It is a secondary analysis of information from the Responding to Women Who Experience IPV in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies initiative, a study in which animals within rural IPV were not the main focus. During the initial design stages of the parent study, the impact of animals and their well-being was considered and questions regarding this were included in the interview guide, thus providing the suitable sample for the analysis conducted herein, although with a small sample size. The geographical representation of rural women is also non-uniform, with a higher representation of southern and central areas and limited northern representation (Kardashevskaya et al. 2022).

Further, this thesis did not include an analysis of findings based on age, race, and class, as this is a secondary analysis on a smaller exploratory study with a smaller sample size. This potentially limits the understanding for unique experiences arising from social and institutional practices faced by women due to their social location. Not including an analysis on age, race, and class, creates a further limitation when looking at the data of Indigenous participants. As
the parent project did not focus specifically on Indigenous women, the data pertaining to Indigenous women’s experiences with rural and remote IPV, and the impacts of historically colonial structures and services are not fully explored in this project. As the area of rural IPV research continues to expand in the prairie provinces it will be important to conduct studies which include the unique experiences and understandings of Indigenous peoples. As well, it is important to include those who identify as Indigenous as Indigenous people account for 17 percent of Saskatchewan’s population (Statistics Canada 2021). Further, this study did not have any participants who identified as 2SLGBTQIA+. This limits the understanding of this work to only heterosexual relationships.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews with women who experienced IPV and focus groups with service providers were held over the phone or using Zoom. This, at times, presented a barrier to participant comfort at the start of interviews. In a few cases, telephone interviews posed challenges in respect to building comfortable connection and repour with participants – preventing an easy start to these sensitive discussions. However, participants ended up feeling comfortable overall and several stated they were thankful for the chance to participate and discuss their experiences in a non-judgmental setting.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

The Responding to Women Who Experience IPV in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies initiative obtained ethics approval from the University of Saskatchewan Human Ethics Board. Before the interviews were conducted, informed consent was obtained and indicated by an electronic signature and verbal consent was obtained before starting the interviews. Participants read and signed consent forms, which were reviewed before the interview to
answer any questions participants may have had. Participants were reminded about confidentiality and data storage protocols, their right to withdraw at any point during the interview, and their right to not answer any questions they did not wish to answer. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw their data from the study up to one month after their interview. Participants were informed of the possibility de-identified interview quotes could be used in published works, conferences, and other dissemination methods. Participants were also informed of the legal obligation of the researchers to report any past or present unreported abuse occurring to anyone who is not an adult (i.e., child abuse). Consent forms were stored separately from any contact information, data, and transcripts to ensure confidentiality of participants.
Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion: Service Providers

This chapter outlines key findings and discussions from the focus groups with service providers who work with IPV. Service provider focus groups highlighted an understanding from participants that there is a need for further animal inclusivity and considerations in service programming to help support women who have animal care concerns while seeking help for intimate partner violence. Findings draw connections between the lack of resources for rural IPV, the importance of animals within the lives of women, and the lack of resources for animal safekeeping when seeking help for IPV. While 13 service providers participated within the focus groups, there were some who had more knowledge and experience of animals in relation to IPV. Those who did not have as much experience in the area often agreed with those whose comments provided the most insight.

This chapter is divided into two sections aligned with the first question of this research project: How do service providers see the role of pet and farm animals in the lives of rural women who are seeking help to leave IPV relationships? The first section focuses on the findings from service provider focus groups and their understanding of animals within rural IPV. Three themes are developed throughout this chapter: 1) lack of safekeeping options, with subthemes 1.1) lack of housing options, 1.2) large animal considerations, and 1.3) transportation considerations; 2) attachment to animals with the subtheme 2.1) animals hold importance in women’s lives; and 3) financial concerns with the subtheme 3.1) caretaking of animals. The second section, the discussion of these findings, develops implications from these findings and makes connections to relevant research.
5.1 Theme 1 - Lack of Safekeeping Options

One of the main themes that emerged from the service provider focus groups was the lack of animal-inclusive safekeeping options. Service providers discussed the lack of options for women looking to leave IPV with their animals, and these options become even further limited when safekeeping is being considered for large animals. All of the service providers discussed and agreed that this overall lack of safekeeping for various sizes of animals leaves women in a position where they may have to decide to leave without their animals. As Service Provider 1 explains:

“... there’s only five programs but again they’re only safe programs for companion animals, so currently only small animals are and are in the major centers, so it could be hours of travel and again forms and that takes time...” (Service Provider 1).

This excerpt highlights the lack of options for animal safekeeping within urban areas found within the service provider data and how residing in a rural area can further complicate the issue of animal safekeeping within IPV.

5.1.1 Lack of housing options

Within the focus groups, service providers spoke to the lack of animal-inclusive housing within the province and what that means for those who are looking for safekeeping with animals. The lack of affordable or low-income pet friendly housing is limited within Saskatchewan and as mentioned in Wuerch et al. (2017), the added cost of pet fees and limited options presents an added layer of difficulty when finances may be limited. Limited pet-friendly housing was also reflected within the interviews with survivors as a barrier to leaving with their pets. One service provider spoke to the challenges within one urban centre of Saskatchewan:
“Yeah. So Regina housing does almost all of our low-income housing here and they don’t allow pets in any of their buildings.” (Service Provider 2)

This quote highlights the difficulty of leaving with pets if there is a lack of affordable pet-friendly housing options to live in after leaving an IPV relationship.

“Yeah, right now in the province, the only place that allows pets currently is Sophia house, which is second stage, so there is that gap in terms of emergency housing. But yes, Regina has plans to very very soon become pet friendly. Which is really awesome. And then in terms of alternative emergency shelters, as far as we know, the only place that accepts pets is STC Wellness center in Saskatoon for folks that are experiencing homelessness. So again, very different than IPV sheltering, but still good to know.” (Service Provider 1)

The above quote emphasizes the lack of housing options for women leaving IPV while recognizing other emergency shelters within an urban centre accept pets and recognizes the importance of more shelters and housing becoming pet friendly to support the human animal bond. However, this shelter is not specifically for those leaving IPV and only accepts small companion pets, leaving those with larger companion or farm animals without options.

5.1.2 Large animal considerations

As mentioned in the literature review, the nature of rural living often lends itself to the inclusion of animals other than those often found in urban homes – including large animals such as horses and other farm animals. Service providers described the added barriers that come with needing safekeeping for larger animals. Providers recognized those in rural areas have a higher likelihood of needing options for animals that might not fit the criteria for small animal programs. Large animal safekeeping programming was also highlighted as a gap within services during survivor interviews that complicated the help-seeking process. This need was recognized as an area within help-seeking services as an appropriate avenue for future programming. As Service Provider 1 mentions:
“I think a tangible thing that can be done is safekeeping for large animals. I think that would be a huge undertaking in terms of what, how, where, that would happen, but it’s been, it’s been well researched and we know that it is needed. So really, safekeeping programs. More for companion animals than there currently is, but any for large animals would really be vital.”

This quote highlights the optimistic outlook for future large animal safekeeping programming within the province with an understanding that this would likely be a complex undertaking due to the nature and locations of the animals. Another service provider spoke further to the topic of the importance of farm animals and being able to find a safe place for these animals who might present transportation and location barriers:

“…we’ve already talked about today is that attachment to some farm animals, who you can’t just throw into a car and, and drive away with. And so, if you’re attached to those animals, you need to figure out what to do with them and where they can go to be safe.” (Service Provider 4).

These quotes illustrate service providers recognize the need for further safekeeping options for large and/or farm animals and that farm animals have unique transportation needs in comparison to smaller pet animals.

5.1.3 Transportation considerations
Transportation within rural areas is often limited to personal vehicles, as discussed in Chapter 2. At times, women may not have access to a vehicle, or their partner may withhold access to a vehicle. All service providers agreed that transportation from rural areas was a significant barrier before the consideration of animals, and becomes increasingly difficult with the inclusion of animals. This subtheme was also discussed throughout survivor interviews, as a lack of available transportation was often a consideration when leaving their IPV relationship with animals. As Service Provider 3 discusses, at times services may need to utilize outside resources
as a way to help support their clients transition from their IPV relationship while recognizing and supporting the human-animal bond:

“So she was leaving provinces which she was very ok with but she had two pets. So our units went, a little bit out of our way but it is still in the realm of our job description, but we actually posted ads on a local Facebook page just looking for transport. There was like transport pages there and we had donations of a couple kennels and we actually had her two cats sent from Saskatoon to Edmonton, with her permission, and I think it was the humane society actually had a program that you could actually fill out a form for and they would actually keep your pets there and keep them safe and promise not to adopt them obviously, and gave them safe shelter until the victim was able to have them back in her home which was ultimately the only way which she left, because that was there.” (Service Provider 3)

This selection from Service Provider 3 exemplifies the importance of safe transportation and the utilization of outside resources for the transportation of animals. Another service provider spoke to the distance sometimes required for women to travel and how this limits the size of animals that can be transported:

“In Saskatchewan there’s only five programs but again they’re only safe programs for companion animals, so currently only small animals are and are in the major centers, so it could be hours of travel and again forms and that takes time, maybe a foster home needs to be found, so there’s certainly a time aspect, a transportation aspect, maybe for the victim the only reason they are surviving right now is the relationship they are having right now with their dog, and so it’s great knowing they are in a safekeeping program but that can also be a barrier when they have to leave them even though that separation and they won’t have them with them for that level of comfort.” (Service Provider 1).

Service Provider 1 emphasizes that while safekeeping programs are a good option for those who have access to them, the transportation and lack of connection remain factors for those living outside of urban centers. Service Provider 1 further illustrates that for some, the human-animal connection is crucial to those who are experiencing IPV and the relationships they have with their animals might be one of the main reasons a woman is able to survive her experiences.
5.2 Theme 2 – The Human-Animal Bond and Women’s Attachment to Animals

Service providers discussed the varying roles animals have within rural woman’s lives, the importance of the human-animal bond, and the importance of these connections. Providers described how animals often act as a support for women and the difficulties that surround safekeeping for animals, which are further compounded when these animals are outside of the normal understanding of a companion animal:

“...we've already talked about today is that attachment to some farm animals, who you can’t just throw into a car and, and drive away with. And so, if you're attached to those animals, you need to figure out what to do with them and where they can go to be safe.” (Service Provider 4).

Another service provider shared how being required to leave animals behind can lead to further emotional stress and increases the risk for their partner to continue to abuse them by way of their animal:

“There’s not many places where you can go and take your animal with you and as far as we are aware there is nowhere that you can take your large animals too, and having to leave if you have a goat or a horse or what have you. Leaving that is a huge emotional toll. And also allows the abuser to continue, potentially continue, abusing and emotionally abusing that survivor or that victim. I will leave it at that.” (Service Provider 1).

This attachment to animals is not only recognized within the service provider focus groups but is also reflected within the interviews with survivors. Animals provide a needed form of support and comfort for those who are looking to leave relationships characterized by rural IPV.

Attachment to animals is further recognized as having importance within the lives of rural women.

5.2.1 Animals hold importance in women’s lives

One service provider noted that, in their experience, animals in some instances can act as a barrier for women wanting to leave as they will not leave without their pet. This theme was
also present within the survivor interviews. Women discussed the support and comfort their pets brought to them and their children during their IPV relationship and how leaving their pets behind was not an option for them. One service provider discussed how, for some, these animals were the source of some of the only affection they have felt in years:

“Especially for my seniors, I’ve had people say multiple times that those animals are the only thing that’s shown me love in twenty years and they’re not willing to leave their situation.” (Service Provider 2).

This quote highlights the companionship animals bring to women and the importance of having these animals in their lives. Another service provider highlighted this importance these animals have for women:

“...maybe for the victim the only reason they are surviving right now is the relationship they are having right now with their dog, and so it’s great knowing they are in a safekeeping program but that can also be a barrier when they have to leave them even though that separation and they won’t have them with them for that level of comfort.” (Service Provider 1).

This service provider speaks to the power of the relationship’s women have with their pets and the importance of working to keep these animals within women’s lives as they seek to leave their relationships characterized by IPV. Animals may also be important to women’s financial considerations, according to service providers, and therefore this must also be taken into account when looking for animal safekeeping options.

5.3 Theme 3 - Financial Concerns

The literature (Wuerch et al. 2017; Giesbrecht 2021; Collins et al. 2018; Stevenson et al. 2018) shows financial considerations are often a concern or barrier when leaving a rural IPV situation. This concern was noted within the focus groups and shows the understanding the women and service providers have regarding the lack of financial support and stability within the lives of IPV
victims. Service providers also recognize that, for some, the ownership of land or other assets can act as a barrier to leaving:

“So, so that's a huge thing. Lots of times, there's financial issues when people if they're living on a farm. I've had more than one case where a woman came to shelter and owned she owned livestock cattle. And she found out that within days all of those cattle which were hers, she or money in her name, were sold by the partner and he kept the money. I've heard of stories where, you know, people can't get legal aid or social assistance because technically they have all these assets, right? They own land. And yet when they're away in a shelter, none of that, they don't have access to any of that. So they're in serious financial straits.” (Service Provider 5).

This selection from Service Provider 5 illustrates how animals can also be an important form of financial support for women, yet also represent a barrier. Within this theme, the idea of overall financial supports was mentioned as a way to help those who are leaving by supporting the potential cost of animal transportation:

“I would also say financial help for people that are leaving like in general. Because a lot of the times the only option is social services which is really not, they're likely leaving a situation where they have never had to be on social services before, especially in a rural setting and they own land and stuff like that, it’s not enough money for them to be able to deal with their problems, it’s not enough money to move five horses to where ever they need to go, I think that’s a huge thing.” (Service Provider no. 2).

Financial considerations were mentioned by all service providers within the study. Providers expressed frustration at the lack of available financial resources and the inclusion of assists within the determination of qualification for legal aid and other social programs when women are actively trying to leave IPV. These feelings were mirrored within the survivor interviews as women spoke to difficulties finding services for which they qualified, including supports for animal caretaking.

5.3.1 Caretaking of animals

The final subtheme within this analysis was noted by service providers who recognized the need for better caretaking resources to support women during the safekeeping process.
resources would help to provide animal and childcare when planning for safekeeping and provide more financial stability throughout the process:

“I would say the impact, I would say most recently I had a client who wasn’t able to care for her animals, children, and work so then that kept her in the home because she had all the things around her, like the family business and so that kind of kept her entrenched there because it just wasn’t possible for her to leave her life and care for all of her dependents, the animals, her children, and the land while also fleeing actively, and abuser who hadn’t yet done anything where the police could take them out, who is also part of the caretaking.” (Service Provider no. 2).

Highlighted within this quote is the service provider’s recognition that animal care can pose a barrier to leaving when animals are reliant on the individual for care. Animal care concerns were also reflected within survivor interviews and within previous literature (Giesbrecht 2021a) as an important barrier to seeking help within rural communities. Findings from service provider focus groups align with the literature by demonstrating an understanding that care responsibilities for land, animals, and children often fall to the women, and act as another layer to the barriers of help-seeking.

The themes discussed by service providers are important to understanding the help-seeking experiences of rural women in Saskatchewan. According to service providers, animals can be an excellent source of support for women who are experiencing rural IPV, but also present a multitude of barriers due to limited resources and policy restrictions around pets and shelters. The service providers who participated recognized the value of the human-animal bond in supporting women and hoped for further changes to maintain the connection between these women and their animals.
5.4 Discussion

Service provider findings from this study highlight the understanding that IPV within rural areas impacts women in various ways and presents unique barriers when seeking help. Service providers who participated in the focus groups recognized many of the barriers faced by rural women exist due to a lack of available supports and services within rural areas. These barriers are further compounded with the addition of animals in the relationship and the human-animal bond. These animals are acknowledged by service providers as having important and various roles within the lives of rural woman. This varies based on the individual experiences of the women and the position of the animal within their lives. As mentioned, this could be any sort of farm animal that could be tied to the finances of the farm and/or woman, hold significant financial importance, or be an important supportive factor in their lives. This section will focus on situating the findings within the recent literature with a specific focus on IPV, rural IPV, and human-animal bond research. This research uniquely contributes to the literature by providing a qualitative approach to service providers’ understanding of animals within rural IPV and furthering the knowledge of the human-animal bond from a context not frequently included within rural IPV literature.

Service providers expressed the women to whom they provide services have experienced various forms of violence within their relationships. They also recognized the rural location of clients often prevented earlier help-seeking and led to further isolation. For example, as noted the women reflected on not being able to recognize the actions of their partners as abuse, small communities where everyone knows one another, and the lack of geographically close neighbours and friends led to easier isolation by their partner. This reflects
research findings that indicate those who experience IPV within rural areas feel further isolation and delay leaving due to the nature of rural areas (Doherty & Hornosty 2008; Faller et al. 2018; Wuerch et al. 2019; Giesbrecht 2021a). Unique to the findings is the recognition of limited supports for women seeking help with pets and no resources for those seeking help with large animals. It was also recognized that the inclusion of such services would be beneficial to many women who are seeking help. However, service providers understood that implementing these types of programs and policies would be a large undertaking.

Service providers also spoke to the difficulty rural and remote women face when trying to leave relationships characterized by IPV due to confidentiality issues within their community and the financial stressors that come with leaving an IPV relationship. Financial concerns become especially prominent if the woman’s finances are tied to a farm and are considered when attempting to access financial assistance when leaving; financial concerns are also important if a woman is experiencing financial abuse. These findings align with previous rural IPV research that highlights these service provider concerns regarding financial stressors for those leaving IPV relationships within rural areas (Collins et al. 2018; Giesbrecht 2021a; Wuerch et al. 2017).

Research within the area of IPV indicates the human-animal bond can act as a support for those experiencing violence but can present a barrier to leaving due to a lack of supports for animal safekeeping (Wuerch et al. 2017; Moffitt et al. 2020; Giesbrecht 2021a,b). The human-animal bond between women and pets was seen by service providers as a key source of companionship and emotional support for women and their children during times of stress. This finding aligns with research findings on the supportive nature of the human-animal bond.
Wuerch et al. 2020; Wuerch et al. 2021; Giesbrecht 2021; Barrett et al. 2018; Moffitt et al. 2020). Service providers within this study indicated that clients felt care for animals was an important consideration when deciding to seek help, aligning with previous research conducted with service providers (Giesbrecht 2021). Service providers further recognized that without increased supports to help maintain this bond through large life transitions, those wishing to leave rural IPV relationships will continue to delay leaving, regardless of if harm is being directed towards their animal(s). This understanding is consistent with the findings noted by Wuerch et al. (2020, 2021). Wuerch et al. (2020, 2021) found service providers acknowledge women leaving rural areas delay leaving due to a lack of, or difficulty with, finding supports for animal safekeeping. With limited supports and challenges regarding finding transportation and timely responses especially for after hour supports, leaving can be further delayed (Wuerch 2020).

Limited research has focused on IPV within a rural context in Saskatchewan. However, the current literature (Stevenson et al. 2018; Giesbrecht 2021a,b; Wuerch et al. 2020) shows similarities to other research conducted on rural IPV. Prior research (Giesbrecht 2021a, Wuerch et al. 2018) indicates service providers recognize the unique challenges presented to rural clients and the current services lack the ability to better serve this demographic due to location, travel times, expenses, etc. Also consistent with previous research (Giesbrecht 2021) is the finding identified by service providers that fleeing with even small animals is significantly more challenging in areas where issues such as transportation arise (i.e., some communities are only accessible by air).
Using both a constructivist grounded and an anti-oppressive theoretical lens to analyze the service provider focus groups and the current literature around IPV, rural IPV, and the human-animal bond, shows that service providers understand and acknowledge the importance of maintaining the human-animal bond throughout the process of a woman leaving an IPV relationship. Grounded theory allows for this project to capture the experiences of service providers and base service recommendations in an experience-based understanding. Further, using an anti-oppressive feminist theory allows for a critical analysis of the available programing and whether these services are able to accommodate diverse needs such as animal safe keeping. While service providers understand the importance of animals and the human-animal bond, they also recognize the barriers to leaving with an animal. These barriers are understood to be further complicated by the rurality of women and the unique needs presented while living within the context of IPV in these geographic locations.

In *Keeping pets safe in the context of intimate partner violence: Insights from domestic violence shelter staff in Canada* (2018), Stevenson, Fitzgerald, and Barrett write that including the human-animal bond within safekeeping from IPV helps to build a safer society for both women and animals. Making these changes to further include animals, including asking questions around the safety of animals, will help to address one of the many barriers faced by women when seeking help for IPV. These authors further note that “Many women see their pets as family members, and when survivors will not leave abusive relationships out of fear for their pets, it is critical to have services in place to assist pets in finding safety as well” (p. 14).
5.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the experiences, perspectives, and understandings from service providers who work with rural women leaving IPV relationships. The findings provide evidence of the importance of animals for women who have experienced rural IPV. They also provide evidence supporting the further inclusion of animals within safekeeping practices and services designed to help those leaving IPV relationships. The current structures and supports provided to women who are seeking help for rural IPV are lacking the resources and capacity to support women who also have animal care concerns. The lack of supports for women to bring animals with them when they leave is recognized by service providers who understand the importance of the non-judgemental support these animals offer. It is further recognized that these animals do act as a barrier for women and further polices and supports should be in place to mitigate this barrier to safety.
Chapter 6: Findings and Discussion: Survivors

Using the same grounded theory and anti-oppressive feminist approach, this chapter reports key findings from the individual interviews with women who have experienced rural IPV. Implementing a grounded theoretical approach to this analysis allows this thesis to understand the experiences of the women who participated from their perspective and ground the findings in their understandings. To further this, including an anti-oppressive feminist approach lets the voices of women become centred within this work by acknowledging their lived experiences and providing a platform for their stories to be seen. This also allows for a broader contextual understanding of how societal norms and understandings contributed to these experiences of rural IPV. These interviews highlighted the importance of animals within the lives of the women and the role of the human-animal bond during and after relationships categorized by IPV. They also emphasized the need for further supports within the province for those looking to leave IPV with their animals, both pet and farm. The names of participants presented in this chapter have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

This chapter is divided into two sections aligned with the second question of this research project: How do women dealing with rural IPV understand the role of animals within their lives? The first section focuses on the findings from survivor interviews and their experiences having animals within rural IPV. I develop three key themes: 1) impact of animals, with subthemes 1.1) feelings of safety and security, 1.2) animals provided purpose, 1.3) importance to children, 1.4) animals as an overall form of support, and 1.5) animals were not always a support; 2) animal-associated barriers for leaving IPV in rural areas with subthemes
2.1) animals as a barrier to leaving, 2.2) lack of support for leaving with animals, 2.3) large animal transportation issues, and 2.4) lack of animal-inclusive housing; and 3) animal safety concerns with subthemes 3.1) threats to animals, 3.2) death or injury to animals, and 3.3) difficulty finding animal care. The second section, the discussion, will focus on developing and understanding the implications of these findings and drawing connections to relevant research.

6.1 Positive Impact of Animals

One of the largest themes within the interviews with survivors was the positive impact animals had within the lives of women while they were in their violent relationships and the importance of the human-animal bond before and after leaving their relationships. This includes providing the feeling of security and safety, providing women a sense of purpose, having an important role in children’s lives, and acting as an overall support for women within rural IPV relationships. The positive and supportive impact animals have within the lives of women living with and leaving rural IPV was also highlighted within the service provider focus groups. Service providers fully supported and understood the impact of the human-animal bond on their clients.

6.1.1 Feelings of safety and security

During the interviews, the women spoke to how having another presence with them provided a sense of security and comfort. The human-animal bond allowed the participants to remain grounded and comforted during and after their relationships. This support was emphasized within the literature and further emphasized through the following quote from Jayna:

“You know, they would come inside, they would walk around with the kids in the fields, just walk with them, play with them, protect them.”
Knowing the kids had their dogs walking with them, or having the dogs inside, allowed Jayna to be comforted by their presence and feel a sense of protection. Animals not only provided a sense of security and safety, but there was also an understanding from participants that these animals gave them a sense of purpose as well.

6.1.2 Animals provided purpose

Within the interviews, the women spoke to how their animals provided a purpose during and after their IPV relationships. Animals can help women to maintain structure and stability during times of uncertainty (Evans et al. 2018). Routine and purpose is often rooted in the needs of the animals, such as a dog needing to be walked or a cat needing to be fed (Evans et al. 2018). The women interviewed in this study spoke to the need for their animal routine throughout their relationships and the importance of caring for and relying on another living being for comfort.

One participant summarized the purpose her pets provided by saying:

“So, I found I had to be taking care of something and, I still am this way, but out there especially. I found if I wasn’t taking care of something and if I wasn’t distracting myself with something that needed me, to depend on me, I was lost, like a sad little lump on the couch which is ironic. Because he made me so dependent on him so I needed things to be dependent on me? I don’t know. It has to be something behind that. But. Ya. I needed animals during the whole relationship.” (Jackie)

Another participant spoke to how her animals allowed her to survive during her relationship and the continued abuse following the separation from her partner:

“Oh yeah. I survived because of my horses. One hundred percent. And my dogs” (Lacy)

These quotes highlight the importance of the human-animal bond during rural IPV relationships. Rural communities, as mentioned in Chapter 2, are often isolating and, as exemplified by the previous quotes, the human-animal bond provides distraction and comfort from the stresses and isolation of a rural IPV relationship. This support is not limited to the
women, as the human-animal bond also benefits children who live with animals in a home experiencing rural IPV.

6.1.3 Importance to children
Children who live within IPV households find animals are a source of comfort during times of stress and violence (McDonald et al. 2015; Collins et al. 2018). This was highlighted during the interviews as the women discussed the connections their children had with their animals. As Caelyn discusses, these animals helped her children through times of stress and provided a distraction from the events that were happening at home:

“Oh! Well I did have two cats. They helped the kids take their mind off what was happening in the home. I did get pets or whatever, so they had their little distraction, which, it helped.” (Caelyn)

This bond continued to be a source of support for her children after the relationship ended, allowing for a sense of normalcy during visits with their parent:

“At least it will give my kids something to comeback to. Where everything is not all changed.’ I said ‘at least they have the cats to come see and come visit to’ and so yeah...” (Caelyn)

Jayna spoke to how her children loved the dogs they lived with and how leaving them behind was a loss that they still feel today:

“Like my kids they still miss those dogs, they love those dogs. They grew up from babies with those dogs” (Jayna)

These quotes illustrate the importance of recognizing the importance of the human-animal bond for children within rural IPV households. This bond can support children and provide comfort and security during times of instability and remain a comforting factor after the violence has ended.
6.1.4 Animals as an overall form of support
A key theme discussed by those who had animals was the overarching feeling of support they brought. This feeling of unconditional love and support is seen throughout the human-animal bond and IPV literature (Moffitt et al. 2020; Giesbrecht 2021b; Barrett et al. 2018). Women spoke to the peacefulness, comfort, and love brought by their animals and the impact of this bond during their relationships. For Lacy, her animals were a key aspect of why she was able to survive during her IPV relationship:

“Oh yeah. I survived because of my horses. One hundred percent. And my dogs. All of them. Well you know... if you walk out there they know if you’re sad or if you’re happy. So I would walk out and just sit there in the pasture and they would all come up and they know, right. And it gave me something to do and purpose and with positivity and they, it took me a really long time to get some of them to be able to respond to a man. Because they hated them. Hated him.” (Lacy)

This excerpt captures the connection Lacy had with her horses and the grounding effect their routines and presence brought her, helping her to survive the most difficult times of her IPV relationship. This supportive relationship is further highlighted by Lainey:

“...I had restrictions and so I was at home a lot and having my dog there was like, the best thing and she was like my best little friend...” (Lainey)

The quote reinforces the importance of the comfort the human-animal bond brings to those living with rural IPV. Animals take on a role as friend and help to lessen the impacts of isolation. Furthermore, the comfort the human-animal bond brings lasts beyond the duration of the IPV relationship, as seen through Jackie’s discussion on how her dog continues to be a reliable source of companionship and support:

“For sure ya, they were super comforting. Even just to this day, [dog name] is on my lap with his head on my shoulder, like ‘it’s ok mom, it’s fine, we’ve done this before, it’s going to be ok.’ He is a, German Shepherd Pointer mix, and he got the worst traits but I love him to pieces. He’s supposed to be a hunting dog but if you send him into the woods he comes back with a stick.” (Jackie)
Having this unconditional support system was important during and after the relationship ended and allowed participants to have a constant safe support to turn to within their lives.

6.1.5 Animals were not always a support

One anomaly during the interviews was the recognition of animals not always being a form of support. Of the participants who spoke to us, three mentioned their animals were not a main form of comfort for them. For one, their pets presented a barrier to being able to leave but remained a source of comfort for her children. Another had a fear of the dog she lived with and the other was left to care for a large number of animals without help, adding to the stress of her relationship. For Alandra, her dog presented a barrier to leaving due to finances and the ability to find a pet-friendly place to live:

“I had two kids to take care of like taking care of a dog was just like another thing just to like deal with it was not at all support for me.” (Alandra)

This same participant did recognize that under different circumstances their dog could have been a support during this time:

“If I didn’t have kids, and probably yeah, it’d be like definitely, but it was like just another mouth to feed and thing to take care of.” Alandra

This feeling of not being able to gain comfort from her animal came from the additional stress placed on her while finding a safe place to live. The added cost of food, lack of animal-inclusive housing, and extra care for the animal added to her already stressful situation. For Miranda, the pets within her home were bonded with her partner and she had a fear of dogs, resulting in more concern than support:

“I don’t like dogs. Not a dog person. I’ve had them but I don’t like them. They scare me right like we had this husky and he was a beautiful husky. Loved it, love the dog. But if it was laying in the kitchen, I couldn’t walk past it at night.” (Miranda)
However, one of the cats within the home was a support for her child, as the cat bonded with the child:

“And the cat hated everybody. She liked. She liked my son. That was it. She liked the dog. And that was it.”

At the time of the interview, Miranda did have a cat of her own that she was able to have during her current relationship. This cat became a support to help her cope with the impacts of her previous relationship:

“Our cat, especially when like, when they’re really little when they’re kittens, and they don’t like to go very far. They’re nice. They help they really do help.”

The other participant who mentioned their animal was not a main source of comfort during their rural IPV relationship was forced to care for a large number of farm animals without help. For Loretta this care responsibility was a main source of stress for her:

“Well. First and foremost we had fifteen head of, fifteen horses, that he abandoned with me and I was left to try to care for animals, a large number of animals all of which were his...” (Loretta)

Similarly to Miranda, Loretta had her own horse, separate from the 15 she still has. This horse and her current dogs were important supports for her after she left her relationship:

“Oh yes! I still have her. When I left the farm I took her with me, well not to my house, I took her to [place]. She’s at [place] and so I still have her and I still ride her and I had two dogs which I still have and yeah. Big supports.” (Loretta)

These three participants recognized that animals can be a form of support. However, at the time of their relationships these animals added to the stress of being within an IPV relationship and made it harder to leave. Each participant recognized that, under different circumstances, animals would be a form of support for them. For two, the support came after their relationship was over and their stress levels were reduced.
6.2 Animal-associated Barriers for Leaving IPV in Rural Areas

The theme of difficulty leaving with their animals developed during the interviews with women who experienced rural IPV. For some, this was due to transportation issues and the added difficulty of hauling large animals, while others noted issues with housing and the added cost associated with having animals. This was also recognized by service providers within the focus groups as an important barrier to those seeking help for rural IPV and who had an animal that was important to them.

6.2.1 Animals as a barrier to leaving
During the discussions around leaving with animals, participants also spoke to a variety of factors that complicated leaving with animals. These included lack of supports for removing animals, a lack of transportation options especially for large or multiple animals, and difficulty finding suitable or pet-friendly housing. Participants spoke to the positives of the human-animal bond provided during and after their relationships. Despite this, many spoke to how the human-animal bond proved to be a barrier to leaving. Participants spoke to the psychological and emotional issues presented when they were unable to take their animals with them. Danica highlights this barrier when she spoke to her experiences of leaving and the possible consequences for the dog and the judgement she faced for her decision:

   “It was definitely, like it was definitely a barrier for leaving like I was told near the end that if I didn’t come back the dog would die. I don’t think it did. But like having to make that decision, which some people judge me for, like leaving it there not really knowing what was what’s happened to it ...” (Danica)

For Danica, the circumstances around her leaving the relationship led her to make the choice to not take her dog with her, despite not knowing what the outcome would be for the dog.
Animals as a barrier to leaving rural IPV was discussed within many different contexts during interviews. For some, the lack of supports to be able to take a pet with them proved to be a barrier to leaving.

6.2.2 Lack of support for leaving with animals
The lack of support experienced by women leaving rural IPV is also recognized by service providers in the focus groups who understand the importance of the human-animal bond for these women and the lack of available resources for leaving with pets. The compounding stress due to the lack of supports increases with the number of animals as shown by Jackie:

“It was like, I don’t think I’m going to be able to save everybody, I can’t let go of them cause the kitten I raised from an hour old on a bottle so like, I can’t mentally lose something else, like that’s important to me, but I have no choice. It made it so hard to get out of there. I left my one dog there, my Husky, she is still in Saskatchewan. I think one of the hardest things was to leave her there because he was mean to the animals.” (Jackie)

This passage highlights the mental toll on these women due to a lack of support for women who are seeking help for rural IPV and want to take their animals with them. Similarly, the lack of options for those seeking help with large animals has similar stress factors for the women.

6.2.3 Large animal transportation issues
Women who had large animal considerations when leaving rural IPV relationships spoke to the difficulties of finding space to keep their animals and the ability to transport them to safety.

Board and transportation became more difficult as the number of animals increased. One participant spoke to how she needed to have multiple people move her horses to safe locations:

“Oh man. My dad’s best friend came and got my horse and then my best friends aunt came and got the other one and came straight down to her house and that’s where he is now.” (Jackie)
Transportation issues were a main barrier for Jackie as she sought to leave. Having unreliable transportation to get around herself made it more difficult and required that she find others with the means and ability to transport her horses to a safe place. Lacy spoke to how the ownership of animals of any kind should not be what holds someone back from being able to leave an IPV relationship:

“Cause just because you have a horse doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t be able to leave an abusive situation and not have to leave your horse, or your goat, or your pig, or whatever it happens to be, there is no way that should impact whether you stay or go. And like I said, it was guaranteed over a year that I tried to figure out how to get out of there ...” (Lacy)

Lacy further highlighted leaving with animals, especially more than one, comes with issues that can keep someone within their relationship longer due to a lack of transportation and support services for leaving:

“...but there was nowhere for me to go with horses, dogs, cats, all the animals that I had. And if I had walked out, they would have all been dead.” (Lacy)

This quote emphasizes the importance of accessible resources for leaving with animals. Along with the lack of transportation, the difficulty finding a safe living space for herself and her animals proved to be another layer in the barriers preventing her from leaving her relationship. An absence of transportation supports is compounded by the scarcity of animal-friendly housing and large animal options and results in delayed leaving, as discussed below.

6.2.4 Lack of animal-inclusive housing
As indicated within the literature (Moffitt et al. 2020; Giesbrecht 2021b; Collins et al. 2018; Wuerch et al. 2017), one of the barriers for those looking to leave an IPV relationship is the limited housing options available. Further complicating the housing issue for women is the addition of animals. Pet-friendly housing accessible to those leaving IPV is scarce due to limited
IPV shelters accepting pets and few rentals accepting pets, with accessibility issues compounded by the cost of pet deposits for rentals that do accept pets. As Jackie explained, finding a safe, pet-friendly place to live within a small rural town while having multiple pets was not easy:

“But trying to find a place to put everybody and I was staying in a hotel. I had a hedgehog cage, I had a fully grown cat, I had a kitten, and then I had [dog name] who is this crazy energetic dog and then we’re in a small hotel room. It’s not even a hotel room, it’s like a small crew house lodge, so it’s literally a bed and a sink and a toilet. It was a huge struggle.” (Jackie)

Jackie was able to find a place to stay within the town in which she lived, but she further highlighted the difficulty of finding somewhere to live with her pets after she found the initial hotel room:

“So like, I had very very limited options with that. Cause the ones that were pet friendly I didn’t want to live in because they were falling apart, like the roofs would be caving in or the floors would be like, ya, it’s a very small town with very few options for people with pets.” (Jackie)

This quote emphasizes the limited housing options available within rural areas. Any pet-friendly housing comes with the added cost of pet deposits, and as Jayna mentions the funds from social assistance programs do not go towards covering this added cost:

“But no place would take pets, or take them without a pet deposit, which social assistance wouldn’t help me with so I had to leave them behind...” (Jayna)

Unfortunately, the lack of accessible pet-friendly housing and financial costs of pet deposits required Jayna to leave her dogs behind. This decision was not one made easily as she and her children wanted to take the dogs with them. As she states:

“I fricken loved them and tried so hard.’ (Jayna).
6.3 Animal Safety Concerns
The final theme from the interviews with women who experienced rural IPV is the concern for animal safety, including threats to animals, death or injury to animals, and difficulty in finding animal care. The literature notes that animal safety is a barrier that prevents women from leaving IPV relationships (Ascione et al. 2007; Hartman et al. 2015; Wuerch et al. 2020; Collins et al. 2018; Barrett et al. 2018; Giesbrecht 2021b). Animal safety was also identified by service providers who participated in the focus groups as a key issue facing rural women leaving IPV within Saskatchewan. For these women, threats to their animals were used as a form of coercion and control by their partners.

6.3.1 Threats to animals
The importance of the human-animal bond to those within the study who spoke to having a connection and feeling support from their animals resulted in threats to their animals being used as a tool by their partners. Because of the bond, threats were made to the health and safety of these animals as means to try and control and manipulate the actions of these women. Using animals or pets as a form of coercive control is seen throughout the IPV literature (Phillips 2015; Wuerch et al. 2020; Giesbrecht 2021a; Arkow 2019) and was mentioned by service providers within the focus groups as a method by which partners continue to abuse women. Caelyn talks about the time her partner put her dog in a life-threatening situation:

“...I was driving and we were going somewhere and I had the dog with me and he picked her up and he held her out the car window and I was just so fucking, I don’t know if I had ever been as scared as I was when he did that. And we were driving over the bridge and she’s a little dog so it was like, horrifying” (Caelyn)

Caelyn continues and explains how she wanted to get her dog back safely:
“I was willing to do whatever he wanted to get the dog back in the car. You know, he really had that handle on me with her.”

These threats made to Caelyn’s dog were recognized as a controlling factor by the participant as she “love(s) her so fricken much” that her partner was able to use the bond against her. This form of psychological control and manipulation by a partner was mentioned by Lacy as well. For Lacy, the strategic methods used by her partner left her constantly worried about the safety of her animals:

“Yeah. I mean there was instances where my gate would be open and my horses, like they were out in the highway. And that’s something that you can’t prove. If a fence is cut you can’t like, someone did this right? But everything was done very strategically, like, oh the gate was left open.” (Lacy)

Lacy spoke further to the concerns she had for her animals during the time during her relationship and their separation, mentioning one of her dogs was let out of the yard using the specific whistle to which they were trained to respond:

“You know what I mean? So that happened. One of my dogs, [pause], one of my dogs was let out... So I immediately went out to the highway and she had been hit on the highway” (Lacy)

Her other dog suffered from poisoning. Lacy understood there was no way to prove if these acts to her animals were intentional, but they led to concerns regarding her safety and the safety of her other animals. The actions of her partner also led to some of her animals being afraid of people who resembled her partner. Jackie also spoke to how the treatment of her animals impacted them:

“He was terrified of him. And it broke them in a way, because he would be like, he would come home and [dog name] would lay down and pee and it drove him up the wall, like that’s a common thing in shepherds and collies, it’s a very submissive thing, like he would hit him. Like, ‘oh you stupid dog, why would you pee on my boots’ and yell at him and stuff” (Jackie)
The threats and abuse to her pets caused even further concern for the safety of her animals while she was leaving, knowing there was a realistic threat to their lives. In the next section, participants discuss the issues and losses they experienced with their pets during and after their IPV relationships.

6.3.2 Death or injury to animals
During the interviews with the women, death or injury to animals was discussed within multiple contexts. As mentioned in Chapter 2 and in the above subtheme, harm to animals can be used by an intimate partner as a form of coercive control. For participants within the study, the emotional toll of having their animals harmed has had lasting impacts:

“Like I said, it’s a few years post and I have done a lot to overcome it and yeah, like my horses, not the joint, but my specific ones, would have been shot and I did have the issue with the dogs and there is no way to prove it.” (Lacy)

This excerpt from Lacy highlights the lasting impacts of the threats to her animals had on her.

Another participant discussed the care she discovered her dogs were receiving after she left:

“Like she had a batch of puppies and I came checked on them twice after I moved out but she was so fucking malnourished because no one was feeding them properly, like my girl, [name], and she’s breastfeeding like how many puppies and I don’t know. She somehow passed of exhaustion or something...” (Jayna)

Jayna’s quote illustrates the concern women feel for their animals when they can not take them when they leave is not unwarranted. The concern for animal safety due to threat or death was further discussed by another participant:

“I’m trying to get my animals off the property so that they don’t get shot. He ended up killing my duck, which is a whole other thing, he ended up eating him for thanksgiving. That was super cool.” (Jackie)

This quote demonstrates the ongoing risk to Jackie’s animals and the harm that came to her pets during the relationship. Past experiences in the relationship evidently increased her
concern for animal safety when she was trying to leave the relationship. The threats to animals required her to find safekeeping and care for her animals, yet, as mentioned within the focus groups, this care can be difficult to find.

6.3.3 Difficulty finding animal care
The final subtheme for animal safety concerns is the difficulty finding animal care when leaving a rural IPV relationship. Participants spoke to such challenges in detail. Not being able to find a safe place for all her animals led Lacy to have friends look after her smaller pets and hope that her large animals would be safe where they were:

“Yeah and in that process, in all of that, I had called my friend who was looking after the dogs and she had taken all the dogs and all the cats out of the house and taken them to my moms house. So I knew they were safe. I couldn’t do anything about the horses but the dogs and cats were safe.” (Lacy)

Having multiple animals posed a barrier for Lacy and further compounded the stress of her relationship. Lacy was not alone in concern for the care of animals. Loretta also dealt with struggling to find someone willing to help with her animals:

“It was a huge amount of stress. Because I, well fifteen horses is a lot of horses to deal with number one, and I was always having to beg someone to help me.” Loretta

This quote highlights the difficulty of finding help and care for large amounts of farm animals within rural areas. Care of animals and the farm often falls to women, acting as yet another barrier to leaving a rural IPV relationship. Acknowledgment of these extra care duties was mirrored by the service providers and mentioned within previous literature (Riddell et al.2009; Giesbrecht 2021b).
6.4 Discussion

Findings from this portion of the study highlight the deep connections women feel to their animals during and after their IPV relationships, along with the importance of these animals to their children. Participants who spoke about their animals also recognized the multitude of barriers they faced when wanting to leave with their animals. The roles of support or the barriers faced varied depending on the participant and the type or number of animals they were concerned about. As mentioned within this chapter, the animals these women refer to hold various positions within their lives. For some participants, these animals have financial importance, while others are pets with which the women and children have bonded. The types of animals discussed also varied but mainly included horses, dogs, and cats. This section focuses on situating the findings from these interviews within the literature on IPV, rural IPV, and the importance of the human-animal bond. This research uniquely contributes to the literature as it works to fill a gap focusing on the importance and the role of the human-animal bond for women seeking help for rural IPV from the perspective of those who have this experience.

Participants expressed the ways their animals provided comfort when options for services were limited. These support aspects include feelings of comfort, security, providing a sense of purpose, and providing comfort to their children. A sense of comfort and emotional security provided by animals was highlighted throughout the interviews and is prevalent within the literature concerning animals and IPV (Moffitt et al. 2020; Giesbrecht 2021b; Barrett et al. 2018). Research by Giesbrecht and Wuerch have found the human animal bond is an important support for women experiencing IPV. In an online survey, Giesbrecht (2021) found 51.7% of respondents did not want to be away from their pet and 27.3% did not want to be away from
their farm animals, as these animals were an important source of comfort and support. For rural women, Wuerch et al. (2020) found animals were a useful informal support for women as services in rural areas are limited. Furthermore, Wuerch et al. (2021) found clients often asked service providers for help with animals safekeeping and delayed leaving due to not being able to access animal safekeeping. Uniquely, this project found participants living in rural areas relied on their animals for support due to not only their IPV relationship but also the isolating nature of their location. These non-judgmental supports were a benefit to their mental health and allowed participants to survive times of violence and uncertainty. Furthermore, animals provided a sense of physical security for some participants. For many, their lives were often unpredictable with high levels of stress; having animals provided participants a grounding and calming presence within their lives. This presence provided further comfort to participants who had children. Women spoke to knowing these animals would be a safe space for their kids when they returned to visit with the other parent and how their animals were a friend and important part of their children’s lives. The extent of this was exemplified by Alandra, who was willing to navigate the difficulties of leaving with a pet so her children would be able to have that support when they moved. These findings support the previous research on IPV and the human animal bond and the importance for women and children (Collins et al. 2018; Fitzgerald et al. 2019; Barrett et al. 2018; Newberry 2017; Fitzgerald 2007). Collins et al. (2018) found in a study focusing on animal maltreatment in IPV and safe planning, that women delayed leaving until they could find a place to take their kids and the pets as children missed their pets when they left without them. As well, Stevenson et al.’s (2018) study produced results showing
service providers are aware women frequently delay leaving relationships out of concern for their animals and the barriers women face when leaving with animals.

However, important to the context of this non-judgemental support is the types of barriers women faced when trying to leave with their pets. The participants who had animals in their lives all recognized the barriers they presented to leaving their relationships. These barriers included issues such as a lack of financial security, where the inclusion of bringing an animal only added to the cost of food and housing, as well as the difficulties related to transporting animals to new, safer locations. The issue of transportation is noted in research regarding rural IPV, including the often limited access to public transportation (Forsdick-Martz and Sarauer 2000; Faller et al. 2018; Wuerch et al. 2016). The literature also notes these women sometimes have limited or no access to a personal vehicle, as their partners have removed their access to their private vehicles to increase their dependency on the abusive partner (Wuerch 2016; Faller et al. 2018; Moffitt et al. 2020; Giesbrecht 2021). Another barrier presented within these interviews regarded housing. Participants had difficulty finding pet-friendly housing at all, and that available was not affordable because the pet deposits added to the financial cost of leaving.

Previous literature as well as participants recognize how the bond with their animals was used against them by their partners (Collins et al. 2017; Wuerch et al. 2017; Giesbrecht 2021b). For a few, the well-being of their animals was used for control and created safety concerns for their animals and compounded the already complex barriers to leaving a rural IPV relationship. Intimate partners are aware of the importance of these animals and the bond they share with their partners and have used this to prevent women from leaving relationships.
(Collins et al. 2017; Wuerch et al. 2017; Giesbrecht 2021b). The words of the women in this study align with earlier findings regarding coercive control based on threatening or harming the animals for which these women cared. This form of control uses the fear of harm or death to an animal as a way for an abuser to maintain control over their partner (Wuerch et al. 2017; Collins et al. 2017; Barrett et al. 2020; Wuerch et al. 2020). As discussed above, Caelyn, who had her small dog hung out of a car window, spoke to the fear and willingness to do whatever it took to be able to get her dog safely back inside the car. Heavily emphasized above by Lacy was being able to find care for her cats and dogs but not for her horses, leaving them vulnerable to harm by her partner.

Research into animals and their importance in IPV has largely been urban centric with a focus on smaller animals, such as dogs and cats (Collins et al. 2018; Bermea, Moorefield and Khaw 2019; Fitzgerald et al. 2016; Hageman et al. 2018). Research further finds women wish to maintain their relationship with their pets, which serve as one of the most reliable sources of support during times of leaving IPV relationships (Wuerch et al. 2017; Fitzgerald 2007; Newberry 2017). This was also found to be the case for the rural women who participated in this study as women spoke to the struggles of taking their animals with them, and for some, the emotional toll of leaving their animals behind.

The literature recognizes the animal and farm care concerns of women experiencing rural IPV (Fraehlich 2014; Hornesty & Doherty 2003), but findings indicate these animals may have more significance to women than financial and farm roles. Uniquely, the findings from this study show large animals (e.g., horses) can provide a similar sense of comfort and support to women as smaller animals (e.g., dogs and cats). Along with the findings, other IPV research
(Giesbrecht 2021b; Collins et al. 2018; Wuerch 2020) notes that animals within an IPV relationship can result in delayed help-seeking by women as they are reluctant to leave their animals. This was emphasized by Lacy who was unwilling to leave her horses knowing they would not survive being left with her partner. Bringing this knowledge forward and recognizing the unique safety issues presented when considering what safekeeping looks like for animals with unique living requirements works to fill the gap in the animal inclusive IPV literature as well as the rural IPV literature involving the importance of animals.

The theoretical lenses applied to the interview analysis of this thesis allows for a ground up understanding of the importance of animals based on the lived experiences of women survivors. Analysing micro level interviews and focus groups to understand the experiences of women and service providers regarding rural IPV allows for a broader macro understanding of the structures and systems as understood from the participants perspectives. A qualitative methodology provided a thorough contextual and emotional understanding of women’s experiences that would not have been captured through the use of a quantitative study. This analysis shows the current services do not meet the needs of women who are seeking help for rural IPV and who also have animal considerations. As mentioned in Chapter 5, service providers also recognize the existing services do not meet the needs of these rural women, especially if they have large or multiple animal care concerns. Using the aforementioned constructivist grounded and an anti-oppressive theoretical lens, interviews with women and current literature regarding rural IPV, and the human-animal bond, shows women value their relationship with their animals and take great consideration to their animals’ well-being during and after their IPV relationships. Constructivist grounded theory allowed this project to
highlight the lived experiences of women by allowing their stories to be the knowledge base of this thesis. Constructivist grounded theory further allows for the knowledge presented in both the interviews focus groups to be understood from the unique rural social context and further demonstrate how the rurality of these women affects their experiences in help-seeking and the bond they have with their animals. The participants deeply cared for their animals and had various concerns regarding their safety, but the many barriers (e.g., animal safekeeping and transportation) in their path to leaving their relationship were at times too big for the women to overcome. These barriers stood in the way of being able to maintain the crucial human-animal support for these women and children. The unique needs presented by rurality further complicated their efforts to leave their IPV relationship and made it harder to maintain the indispensable bond between these women, children, and their animals. As such, future policy and recommendations are derived from an anti-oppressive framework and look at addressing main barriers for women looking to seek help for rural IPV. This analysis thus highlights existing gaps in services and policies for these women.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter explores key findings within the individual interviews with women who experienced rural intimate partner violence. These interviews stressed the importance of the human-animal bond within the women’s lives during and after their IPV relationship, and the struggles of being able to maintain that bond when seeking help for their relationship. For many of these women, their animals provided a grounding presence and unconditional support during times of stress and provided a key support to help them heal from their experiences.
These interviews emphasized the need for further supports within the province for those looking to leave IPV relationships with their animals, both pet and farm.

Research findings focused on answering the second research question acknowledged the human-animal bond and the significance of the animals for those who live in a household categorized by rural IPV. Participants recognized the support and comfort their animals brought to them and their children during times of stress and isolation. The importance of having these animals in their lives was noted, but so was the recognition of the barriers created by the animals and the human-animal bond. Participants spoke to the difficulties of leaving relationships with their animals due to a lack of supports, including limited suitable housing and transportation, added financial costs, fear for the safety of their animals and the way their relationship with their animals was used as a form of coercive control by their partners, and the difficulty of finding suitable care for their animals during and after relationships. Many of the experiences discussed by women were recognized by service providers who understood the importance and meaning of the human-animal bond and how the limited resources in place for animal safekeeping often resulted in added barriers and delayed leaving for women in rural areas.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore and understand the importance of animals for women who are seeking help for rural IPV from the perspectives of service providers and those who have experienced rural IPV in Saskatchewan. This study showcases a unique look into this understudied area. Service providers participated in focus groups and worked in the areas of IPV throughout the province. Women who participated in this study had experienced IPV in a rural area of Saskatchewan and had been living away from their partner for over a year. Findings from these two portions of the parent study had themes in common that can be used to recommend improvements for policies and the creation of new programming. This last chapter presents implications of findings, recommendations for future research, and policy recommendations.

7.1 Implications of Research Findings

The findings of this thesis support the need for more robust programming and supports for women who are seeking help for rural IPV. The inclusion of animals was highly impactful on women’s experiences and help-seeking journeys. Threats to animals’ health and safety, lack of animal-inclusive shelters and housing options, financial concerns, and limited supports for transportation of animals all compounded the barriers for women when seeking help for rural IPV. Integrated supports and policies can help to reduce these barriers and minimize the psychological stress associated with leaving an animal behind.

For this thesis the overall question was: what roles (if any) do animals, pet or farm, play for rural women when seeking help for IPV? With service provider and individual sections being guided by the following two questions respectively:
1. How do service providers see the role of animals in the lives of these women?

2. How do women in rural areas see this role in their lives?

Service providers understood animals hold a significant role for women who live in rural areas including being a source of income for the women and potentially the farm. Animals were also recognized by service providers as a supportive factor for women who are leaving an IPV relationship. This support was viewed as potentially one of the only safe connections these women have in their lives. However, this supportive aspect is also seen as a barrier to women seeking help as women want to maintain their connection with their animals and women are met with a lack of supports for leaving with their animals. This is further complicated when there is a large number or large animal due to the lack of supports available.

Women who experienced rural IPV viewed their animals as an important form of support during and after their IPV relationship. Participants who spoke to having animals described the comfort and safety animals provided for them and at times their children. While women recognized the support their animals provided, they also recognized their animals became barriers to leaving their relationship due to a lack of animal inclusive housing, financial reasons, and a lack of safekeeping and transportation for large animals.

This research and the current literature identify the need to continue to focus on how to improve help-seeking for women with animals who experience rural IPV. The literature reveals the benefits from the human-animal bond are crucial and a major consideration for those who seek help for IPV (Giesbrecht 2021a; Giesbrecht 2021b; Wuerch et al. 2020; Fitzgerald et al. 2019; Stevenson et al. 2017). Findings from this project support this statement and highlight the importance of maintaining the human-animal bond throughout the help-seeking process.
The understandings from service providers who participated within focus groups highlighted the importance of the human-animal bond and the financial ties to animals and farming for some women. The inclusion of service providers within this study allows for a deeper understanding of the contextual issues regarding current policies and what resources are needed and the possibility of these being implemented. This experiential knowledge from service providers is important to gain insights into the programming and clients they help.

7.2 Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this research draw attention to several different areas for future research. This study highlights the importance of using a grounded theoretical approach in future research within the context of rural IPV. Studies should focus on further exploring the roles of animals within rural IPV and how resources could better meet the needs of those experiencing IPV in a rural context. Research should further examine the role of the human-animal bond for rural and remote Indigenous women who experience IPV as the lasting effects of colonialism have resulted in Indigenous women experiencing IPV rates three times higher than non-indigenous women (Burczycka, 2016). Furthermore, approximately half of Indigenous women reside in rural and remote areas, further increasing Indigenous women’s risk for IPV (Statistics Canada 2017; Klingspohn 2018; Brownridge 2009; Boyce 2016).

Future research may consider further exploring the importance of the human-animal bond for those living with rural IPV. As this study is a secondary analysis, further aspects and details were likely not included. In addition, this study highlights the importance of animal considerations for women in IPV relationships and the barriers experienced by these women.
Further exploration of these barrier and experiences could improve existing policies and programming designed to help women with animals who wish to leave an IPV relationship.

This study emphasized the importance of including service provider perspectives within research. Future research could aim to further explore how service providers understand animals in the context of their clients’ situations and what gaps in services they see within their fields. Such research would contribute to improved policy recommendations and a greater understanding of the needs of those with animals who seek help for rural IPV.

Another aspect for future research is the role of the human-animal bond for women and children in healing after an IPV relationship. Viewing this from a grounded approach in conjunction with further service provider research would help to develop knowledge around the human-animal bond as a source of resilience for survivors and to create policies informed by human-animal research.

Lastly, future research should include a focus on the roles of large and farm animals for those living with rural IPV. Care of farm animals and the financial ties often associated with animals can create an additional barrier for women (Collins et al. 2018; Giesbrecht 2021a; Wuerch et al. 2017). Further understanding of these barriers is particularly important for the creation of policies related to those within rural contexts.

7.3 Policy Recommendations

The results of this project have many implications for policies on a provincial and service level. The barriers presented by rural IPV as noted within this thesis cannot be solely addressed by services nor resolved through simple means. It is important to situate the rurality and high rates of IPV experienced by women in these areas within the context of societal norms and
masculinities. IPV has lasting impacts on those who experience this violence and needs to be
addressed in a comprehensive manner that targets the barriers and normative social
understandings that complicate leaving a rural IPV relationship. Attention to the aspects of the
lives these women hold important and better understanding of their experiences must inform
policies to help create new and change existing policies in ways that are beneficial to those to
whom they affect.

Policies that target IPV are a crucial component for women who are seeking help and
are an important goal towards lowering the rates of IPV. These policies take many forms, but a
notable gap is policies and supports designed to assist women who are leaving with animals.
Some policy changes could include further inclusivity of animals within IPV shelters and an
expansion of the current temporary foster supports; increasing the available supports for
animal transportation for all sizes of animals; the addition of supports for women who need
help with large animal transportation and safekeeping (such as a list of available locations and
what animals they could take); and allowing for social assistance to be used towards pet
deposits in rental properties. Moreover, addressing the main issue and reducing the delays for
women seeking help with animals requires a better understanding of the importance of the
human animal-bond and inclusion of this understanding during policy creation.

The process to lower the rates of rural IPV will be long. Patriarchal attitudes will
continue to persist within rural areas. These same attitudes compound the issues women face
when leaving a rural IPV relationship. Policies that target the barriers faced by women living in
rural areas should also emphasize an understanding of the importance of the human-animal
bond. This could include workshops focusing on the impacts of violence on women and children
with the addition of how animal abuse affects those within the household. Furthermore, programming and policies designed to help individuals recognize and understand the various forms of abuse can prevent delayed recognition of IPV relationships.

7.4 Next Steps

To disseminate the findings of this study, this thesis will be published on the University of Saskatchewan’s online thesis database – HARVEST. Next steps for research on the human-animal bond and rural IPV within Saskatchewan or prairie provinces should move beyond an exploratory study and secondary analysis to a larger, more geographically inclusive study. In doing so, research can capture the varied and unique experiences of women throughout the province, including those in communities this study did not capture. Further, this area of research needs to expand to recognize the importance of Indigenous lived experiences within the province. In doing so, the field will better understand the human-animal bond in relation to rural IPV while living in and navigating systems built and designed within a white-settler colonial context. Including a more Indigenous focus within this field can help to understand where IPV programming and policies continue to fall short of supporting Indigenous clients. Furthermore, rural IPV research should include a look towards understanding the human-animal bond as it relates to farm animal and livestock welfare. Furthering this area of the research will bring a greater understanding to how IPV affects the human-animal bond and animal welfare on farms, and how the inclusion of farm animals further impacts a woman’s decision to leave a relationship impacted by rural IPV. Research into further understanding these areas will provide support for how best to change policies and programming designed to support the human-
animal bond for women who are seeking help for rural IPV within Saskatchewan and the prairie provinces.
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Responses and Resources to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Against Female Victims Within Rural Municipalities in the Prairie Provinces, 2020-2021." Prairieaction Foundation Special Call, $74,902.


Appendix A: Interview Guide Questions

11. While you were in a violent/abusive relationship, were you responsible for the care of farm animals or livestock? Yes______No________

4a. Seeking help can be very difficult for many women. Did anything make it difficult to disclose or seek help? What challenges did you face?
   Probes:
   • Isolation (including geographic)
   • Access to technology (i.e., poor/unreliable/unavailable internet connection, cellular service)
   • Transportation barriers (i.e., lack of transportation, expensive)
   • Fear of losing your privacy, confidentiality? Fear of stigma, shame?
   • Fear of racism/discrimination?
   • Was it hard to find services?
   • Fear of removal of children from CPS?
   • Fear of retaliation, use of firearms?
   • Care of pets, livestock, or family farm?
   • Fear of financial insecurity/lack of housing?
   • Fear of losing immigration status?
   • Religious or faith-based considerations
   • Parenting concerns
   • Other challenges?

4b. How did living in a rural area impact your help-seeking or disclosing your experiences of abuse?