








# A tool for detection of the connection between domestic violence and companion animal mistreatment in Botucatu, São Paulo, Brazil

## *Ferramenta para detecção da conexão de violência doméstica e maus-tratos a animais de companhia em Botucatu, São Paulo, Brasil*

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### ABSTRACT

There is a well-established link intersecting animal cruelty and interpersonal violence that suggests domestic violence can be an indicator of pet mistreatment and other forms of aggression. In Brazil, despite the high rate of domestic violence, there has been little research on the link between domestic violence and animal cruelty. This study aims to propose a tool for detecting animal cruelty in homes where domestic violence against women occurs and for clinical evaluation of animal victims. For the study, 145 Incident Reports (BO) from the Defense of Women Police Station (DDM) of Botucatu, SP, Brazil, were analyzed, and 55 women responded to a voluntary questionnaire about violence against animals. Thirty-one women claimed to own animals at their residence, totaling 54 dogs and 26 cats. Among those women who had animals and answered the questionnaire, it was verified that 14 women (45%) revealed physical violence towards animals by the same aggressor. The clinical examination of animals confirmed that 11 animals had a poor body score index and were in a mistreatment situation. The questionnaire provided valuable information and represented a potential tool that can be used by veterinarians, security, and social professionals to assess cases of domestic violence and comprehension of the welfare of pet animals.

**Keywords:** Animal behavior. Animal cruelty. Link theory. Animal abuse.

### RESUMO

Existe uma conexão bem estabelecida entre a crueldade contra os animais e a violência interpessoal que sugere que a violência doméstica pode ser um indicador de maus-tratos a animais de estimação e outras formas de agressão. No Brasil, apesar do alto índice de violência doméstica, há poucas pesquisas sobre o elo entre violência doméstica e crueldade contra animais. Este estudo tem como objetivo propor uma ferramenta para detecção de crueldade contra animais em lares onde ocorre violência doméstica contra mulheres e avaliação de animais vitimados. Foram analisados 145 Boletins de Ocorrência (BO) da Delegacia de Defesa da Mulher (DDM) de Botucatu, SP, Brasil e 55 mulheres responderam a um questionário voluntário sobre violência contra animais, onde 31 mulheres afirmaram possuir animais em sua residência, totalizando 54 cães e 26 gatos. Entre as mulheres que possuíam animais e responderam ao questionário, verificou-se que 14 mulheres (45%) revelaram violência física contra animais pelo mesmo agressor. Durante o exame clínico dos animais foi confirmado que 11 animais apresentavam índice de escore corporal ruim e situação de maus-tratos. O questionário forneceu informações valiosas e representa uma ferramenta potencial que pode ser utilizada por veterinários e profissionais da segurança e áreas sociais para avaliar casos de violência doméstica e compreensão de crimes envolvendo animais no meio doméstico.

**Palavras-chave:** Comportamento animal. Crueldade animal. Teoria do elo. Abuso de animais.

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## Introduction

The correlation between domestic violence against women and violence against animals has been established in numerous studies and attested by institutions such as the [FBI] Federal Bureau of Investigation (2016), [ASPCA] The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (2007), and the National Link Coalition (2012). Researchers from different areas have discussed the theme for more than 30 years, and it has given rise to the “Link theory,” which establishes that violence against animals is related to violence against women, children, and older adults. According to the theory, violence against animals should be studied because, in addition to ethical issues and legal penalties involved, such an act may be an indicator that other family members are not safe (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016; Lockwood & Arkow, 2016; Reid et al., 2022).

The first study on the subject was carried out in the United States by Ascione (1997). In his research, 71% of women who suffered domestic abuse and owned pets reported that the latter also suffered threats, physical assault, and/or death. Another research done in Ireland found that 57% of the women who took part in the study witnessed aggression and/or threats to their pets by the aggressor. Veterinary medicine professionals play a crucial role when it comes to public health and animal welfare, being an essential player in intervening in the cycle of violence and protecting humans and animals (Ascione, 1997; Gallagher et al., 2008; Monsalve et al., 2017).

However, investigations related to the subject are scarce in Brazil. The first study on the subject was conducted by Padilha (2011), which evidenced a 51% prevalence of

violence against animals belonging to women victims of domestic violence (Padilha, 2011).

Subsequently, Robis (2013) verified that 32% of people charged for mistreatment of animals by the Military Police of the State of São Paulo had also committed other crimes. It was also observed that, of these crimes, 50% were violent against people, the most frequently observed crime being that of corporal injury (Robis, 2013).

A study conducted by Baquero et al. (2018) showed that reports of violence against animals can be interpreted as a risk factor for crimes of interpersonal violence, such as domestic violence, in the city of São Paulo (Baquero et al., 2018). The same study also correlated the occurrence of these crimes with people living in a situation of financial resources scarcity (Mota-Rojas et al., 2022).

Violence is most often reported in situations of poverty, probably due to the higher levels of physical, social, and psycho-emotional stress associated with a lesser availability of resources to solve them. Such stress can generate conflict and culminate in violence (Gomes et al., 2021; Palais, 2021).

The legal provisions prohibit and prevent domestic violence against women. Most of them are provided for in Law number 11.340 of 2006, known as the “Maria da Penha” Law (Brasil, 2006). Just as the many forms of gender violence are typified as a crime by the legislation, so are the cruel acts practiced on animals, in conformity with article 32 of Environmental Crimes Law number 9.605 of 1998, which provides for the detention of he or she who practices acts of abuse, mistreatment, injury or mutilation of animals (Brasil, 1998).

Forensic Veterinary Medicine is a specialty that aims to use technical knowledge for law enforcement to guarantee animal rights based on the legislation and becomes necessary in cases involving animal expertise (Bogardus, 2023). Investigations of maltreatment represent one of the most requested demands for veterinary expertise, and the field of Forensic Veterinary Pathology becomes essential for the correct classification of injuries suffered by animals and interpretation of the cause of death in cases where fatal issues occur. From this information, a veterinary expert prepares a report, and the same may be used in legal proceedings (Gerdin & McDonough, 2013; McDonough et al., 2015; McDonough & McEwen, 2016; McEwen & McDonough, 2016; Munro & Munro, 2013, 2020; Pollanen, 2016; Tremori & Rocha, 2013).

This work aims to identify the connection between domestic violence against women and animal abuse and present a potential instrument for this type of approach: the questionnaire. The hope is that this study can be used

to their advantage by public security, especially in cases of violence against animals and women.

## Material and Methods

The project was approved by the Committee on Ethics in the Use of Animals (CEUA) of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Zootechny of Botucatu and by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of Botucatu Medical School. The protocol generated for the CEUA was 65/2016, and for the CEP, it was 106699/2016.

At the Defense of Women Police Station (Delegacia de Defesa da Mulher, DDM) of Botucatu, SP, Brazil, Incident Reports (BO) were collected. These included the crime of personal injury that falls under the Maria da Penha Law (11.340/2006, Brasil) (Brasil, 2006). The documents recorded from August to November 2016 and from January to September 2017 were selected for analysis.

Women aged 18 years or over who registered Incident Reports (BO) characterized by deeds of personal injury during the period determined above were questioned at the same police station regarding the possession of dogs or cats. Such an inquiry, carried out by filling out a voluntary questionnaire, was a screening device to select victims with or without pet animals.

The victims who had animals were presented with a new questionnaire and went through a semi-structured questionnaire by interview, verifying whether they also had suffered physical aggression.

Subsequently, the selected animals were submitted to an examination for evidence at the Laboratory of Comparative and Investigative Pathology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, Sao Paulo State University, Unesp, Botucatu, SP, Brazil.

The questionnaire was structured to obtain more information about the criminal occurrence and the circumstances experienced by the parties involved. In this manner, it was possible to infer with more background which factors are possibly related to domestic violence and crimes against animals.

The sample number of women interviewed was obtained by all those who fit the inclusion criteria during the period of the questionnaire, these being: a) the woman agreed to participate in the study; b) the animal came from a residence where there had been physical aggression against the woman who sought DDM and filed a complaint, c) permission for body examination of animals presenting physical injury.

Participation was voluntary, and the information provided by the victims was confidential, with their identities kept secret. The women who wished to participate in the study

freely signed a consent form and were duly informed about the research objectives. The questionnaire (Figure 1) was carefully worded to extract as much relevant information as possible without exceeding a total of five minutes so as not to generate excessive emotional discomfort for the interviewees, who are usually emotionally fragile. At the end of the interview, the participant was provided with the contact for the free psychological support service offered by the mental health department of the auxiliary unit of Botucatu Medical School – Botucatu, SP, Brazil.

After data collection, frequency analysis using MS Excel® was performed based on the answers obtained through the questionnaires and information obtained in the Incidents Report.

## Results

Information from 79 documents was collected and analyzed in the first year of research and 66 in the second year, totaling 145 Incident Reports. The data were tabulated in MS Excel®, analyzing the following information: age of the victim, marital status, type of relationship with the aggressor, whether they have children, educational level, and profession. However, many documents were incomplete, especially regarding education and profession. For this reason, these variables were excluded from the analysis.

In the analysis, more than half of the women who registered Incident Reports during the period of the study have children, affiliation as to the victims covered by the study, as mentioned in the Incidents Reports during the period of study, 82 (57%) victims declared had a progeny, in this case, 71 (86%) the father (men) was the aggressor. The mean age obtained for women (victims) was 31.7 years, and for men (aggressors), 34.1 years. Figure 2 shows that the majority of people involved in domestic violence crimes have had an amorous relationship with the aggressor presently or in the past.

The interview structure applied to women victims of aggression, along with the literature study, experience acquired in the previous cycle, and the help of professionals in psychology and social service, provided full support for the questionnaire so that it could be improved, resulting in a detailed and complete tool. In addition to deepening data on animals, the new questionnaire has questions about the aggressors' personal experiences, which allows for the investigation of their possible history involving violence.

The second step was the interview (application of the questionnaire). Instead of 145 women who registered Incident Reports (BO), only 55 (38%) agreed to participate in the study. Of those who accepted, 24 (44%) reported

**Questionnaire – Field Study**

**Address:**

**Contact Phone:**                      **Incident Report:**                      **Date of occurrence**

**Type of violence suffered:**

**Was it the first time you suffered aggression? If not, how many times?**

**What lead you to file a complaint at the Police Station?**

**What is your relationship with the aggressor?**

**Do you have children with him? How many?**

**Have they already witnessed some form of aggression?**

**Do your children show some form of aggressiveness towards animals or people?**

**Are you and the Author still together? ( ) YES ( ) NO**

**If yes, would you like to separate? Why?**

**The aggressor has a history of violence in his own family?**

**Is he aggressive with other people?**

**Does he or did he have any problem with alcohol or drugs?**

**Do you own a pet? ( ) YES ( ) NO**

**Which and how many? ( ) Dogs \_\_\_\_\_ ( ) Cat \_\_\_\_\_ Other Specify \_\_\_\_\_**

**The animals enjoy a greater connection with the aggressor or yourself?**

**( ) WITH ME ( ) WITH THE AGGRESSOR**

**The person who aggressed you has already practices cruelty against animals (it may be subtle such a pushing or failing to feed the pet ( ) YES ( ) NO**

**What shape took the aggression against the animal?**

**How often?**

**This person has already submitted other animals to cruelty? (i.e. cats or dogs in the street)**

Figure 1 – Questionnaire elaborated for interviewing the participants in the study.

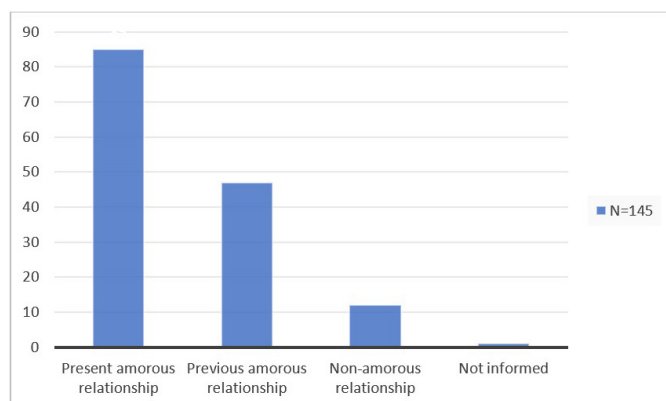


Figure 2 – Type of relationship between women registered the Incident Reports and the relation with aggressor during this study, Botucatu, São Paulo, Brazil.

not having companion animals. Thirty-one (56%) women claimed to own animals at their residence, totaling 54 dogs and 26 cats. Among those women who had animals and answered the questionnaire, it was verified that in 14 cases (45%), the pet was also a victim of physical violence by the same aggressor. Of these, eight stated that their emotional and affective bond with the animal(s) was greater when compared to the bond between the animal and the aggressor.

To determine the type of physical aggression that animals suffered in homes that experienced domestic violence in the city of Botucatu, SP, Brazil, the examination of the body of crime evidence on the animals confirmed that none had apparent mechanics lesions that could be classified according to the forensic traumatology. However, 11 animals had a poor body score index. It was related to a case about zoophilia, suspicion that an aggressor killed animals, donation of animals to avoid more violence, and situations with trapped animals and restricted movement.

## Discussion

The study shows that there are 145 women in the city of Botucatu, SP, Brazil, who are victims of personal injury due to domestic violence and are motivated enough to file a complaint at the Police Station during the period of the study. The results obtained are consistent with those of the previous cycle. They are per the concepts exposed on the “Link Connection,” relating violence against animals, women, older adults, and children, and are proven in other studies in Latin America (Arkow, 2007; Hackett & Emma, 2007; Monsalve et al., 2018; Padilha, 2011; Palais, 2021). Information about children and older adults was not observed, as they are referred to a competent authority other than the Defense of Women Police Station (DDM) of Botucatu, SP, Brazil, used in this research.

A lack of information occurs because sometimes police officers do not correctly complete the Incident Report. This can be justified by the high number of daily occurrences or by considering some information irrelevant to the case. Information regarding the perpetrator was scarcer when compared to that of the victim, a fact that can be justified because the aggressor was not at the police station at the moment of the complaint or because the person registering the occurrence focused on the declaration data and not the offender (Gomes et al., 2021; Reis et al., 2016).

The most significant cause of aggression in the relationship between victim and aggressor is between people involved in a current or past amorous relationship. One possible explanation for such a scenario is society’s essentially sexist mentality, entailing gender inequality, making it acceptable for men to feel superior and dominant over their partner, which predisposes them to use violence as a form of control (Padilha, 2011).

Situations where animals that suffered violence on the part of the aggressor had a greater affective bond with the victim than with the aggressor. This is possibly one of the determining factors for the occurrence of mistreatment of animals in homes where there is domestic violence since the aggressor uses the animal as a way to control or threaten the victim, similar to that reported by Fielding (2010) and Newberry (2017). There is a hypothesis that the aggressor is more likely to abuse an animal owned by another person (in this case, his partner) and not his own (Fielding, 2010; Newberry, 2017). This may suggest that when an animal is linked to a third party, the abuser associates the image of the companion animal as belonging to the said party and, therefore, harms the pet in an attempt to hurt its owner (DeViney et al., 1983). When the aggressor possesses the animal in question, it may be assumed that there is a greater affective bond, which is sufficient to shield the pet from crimes that may be committed against the animal (Arkow, 2021; Baquero et al., 2018; Gomes et al., 2021).

The examination of the body for evidence of crime should be done quickly after the occurrence to evaluate the lesions properly. According to forensic veterinary traumatology, allowing too much time to pass may underestimate injuries. In this case, the importance of the veterinarian and the partnership with institutions could provide the complete examination of the animal. If the animal is dead, it is essential to provide a necropsy exam to clarify the cause of death and mechanism, lesions, and pathologic process (Bogardus, 2023; Pollanen, 2016; Tremori et al., 2017).

The interview used in the study presents a potential instrument to identify the correlation between violence

against women and crimes against animals. Furthermore, when appropriate, in future studies, the questionnaire could collect data on whether the victim's offspring witnessed the aggressions. This issue is particularly relevant because victims with children are pretty common, and the fact that they have witnessed aggression may suggest that they have grown up exposed to violence, a situation that may perpetuate the cycle of violence for humans and animals, as reported in previous research. (Arkow, 2021; Knight et al., 2014; Lockwood & Arkow, 2016; Merz-Perez et al., 2001)

As to the difficulties encountered, the difficulty in accessing women to participate in the study is worth mentioning. It would be ideal to apply this type of interview at the time of the Incident Report at the Defense of Women Police Station (DDM). This research presents a multidisciplinary character since its elaboration, which allows a greater understanding of the situation experienced by these women (Mota-Rojas et al., 2022).

The study, mainly using the questionnaire, contributes to stimulating and forming the basis of new studies on the practical application of public measures related to gender equality, violence against women, and crimes against animals. The data generated may serve as a reference for further research and competent public security agencies in Brazil.

Veterinary medical professionals play a vital role in curbing the cycle of violence involving animals and people since they are the only professionals who can assess and diagnose animal injuries resulting from ill treatment. In addition, they are the professionals most likely to identify cases of correlation between violence against animals and people in under-notified cases, like veterinarian practitioners (medical assistance). It is vital that the issue be studied and discussed by these professionals, providing the necessary support to proceed with the correct conduct when facing a crime involving violence against animals and humans, and

the veterinarian records are a potential tool in this context (Arkow, 2021; Bogardus, 2023; Hernández-Carrasco et al., 2016; Monsalve et al., 2017; Munro & Thrusfield, 2001, Munro & Munro, 2013; Newbery et al., 2016; Pollanen, 2016; Tremori & Rocha, 2013).

## Conclusion

The connection between the outbreaks of violence is a broad and socially relevant issue, not just restricted to veterinary science. With the study, it was possible to infer that animals can suffer physical aggression in homes where there was domestic violence against women in the city of Botucatu, São Paulo, Brazil. The questionnaire is a tool to identify cases of violence against women and crimes against animals, offering the potential to be used and enlarged in future studies. The fragmentation of agencies tasked with overseeing public security in Brazil, along with the inherent complexities in data collection, ethical issues, and the prospect of implementing policies to combat and mitigate the violence cases, demonstrate the importance of disseminating the subject and expanding investigations. This is particularly pronounced given Brazil's elevated prevalence of domestic violence.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

## Ethics Statement

Committee on Ethics in the Use of Animals (CEUA) 65/2016, and Research Ethics Committee (CEP) 106699/2016.

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