

Tool for assessing the risk of abuse of animals kept by women in situations of intimate partner violence

Ferramenta para avaliação do risco de maus-tratos aos animais tutorados por mulheres em situação de violência por parceiro íntimo

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ABSTRACT

Several researchers have already highlighted interpersonal violence related to animal abuse. Animal abuse can be a consequence of interpersonal violence or occur concomitantly with it. In situations involving violence against women by an intimate partner, pets are threatened and abused as a way of intimidating, punishing, or controlling the victim, especially when there is a strong bond between the animal and its owner. This study aimed to build a structured instrument to assess the risk of abuse to which a companion animal tutored by a woman in a situation of violence is exposed, based on the questions presented in a questionnaire to identify animal abuse of women in situations of intimate partner violence, in addition to scientific basis related to the topic. In the form of a questionnaire, the proposed tool is made up of nine statements and five possible answers, aiming to measure how close the relationship between the pet and the woman is, the threats or attacks that the animal has already suffered, and the frequency of drug use by the aggressor. 1 (one) point was assigned for “completely disagree,” 2 (two) points for “partially disagree,” 3 (three) points for “I don’t know how to answer,” 4 (four) points for “partially agree” and 5 points for “I totally agree.” According to the score assigned, the animal’s risk of being mistreated was categorized as low (9 to 18 points), medium (19 to 28 points) or high (29 to 45 points). Each statement has the same weight but is presented in order of increasing severity. Less alarming situations are presented at the beginning of the questionnaire, and more serious ones, such as the actual death of the animal or the woman’s feeling that her attacker can kill her, are presented at the end. The tool must be tested and adequate to effectively measure the abuse risk that a companion animal tutored by a woman in a situation of violence is exposed to.

Keywords: Domestic violence. Link theory. Company animals. Collective veterinary medicine. Collective health.

RESUMO

A violência interpessoal relacionada ao abuso de animais já foi destacada por diversos pesquisadores. O abuso de animais pode ser consequência da violência interpessoal ou ocorrer concomitantemente a ela. Em situações que envolvem violência contra a mulher por parceiro íntimo, os animais de estimação são ameaçados e maltratados como forma de intimidar, punir ou controlar a vítima, principalmente quando existe um forte vínculo entre o animal e seu dono. Este estudo teve como objetivo construir um instrumento estruturado para avaliar o risco de abuso a que está exposto um animal de companhia tutorado por uma mulher em situação de violência, a partir das questões apresentadas em um questionário para identificar o abuso animal de mulheres em situação de violência pelo parceiro íntimo, além de embasamento científico relacionado ao tema. Em forma de questionário, a ferramenta proposta é composta por nove afirmações e cinco respostas possíveis, visando mensurar quão próxima é a relação entre o animal de estimação e a mulher, as ameaças ou ataques que o animal já sofreu e a frequência do uso de drogas pelo agressor. Foi atribuído 1 (um) ponto para “discordo totalmente”, 2 (dois) pontos para “discordo parcialmente”, 3 (três) pontos para “não sei responder”, 4 (quatro) pontos para “concordo parcialmente” e 5 pontos para “concordo totalmente”. De acordo com a pontuação atribuída, o risco do animal ser maltratado foi categorizado em baixo (9 a 18 pontos), médio (19 a 28 pontos) ou alto (29 a 45 pontos). Cada afirmação tem o mesmo peso, mas é apresentada em ordem crescente de gravidade. Situações menos alarmantes são apresentadas no início do questionário e outras mais graves, como a morte do animal ou a sensação da mulher de que seu agressor pode matá-la, são apresentadas no final. Há necessidade de que a ferramenta seja testada e adequada para que a avaliação do risco de abuso a que está exposto um animal de companhia tutorado por uma mulher em situação de violência seja efetivamente mensurada.

Palavras-chave: Violência doméstica. Teoria do elo. Animais de companhia. Medicina veterinária do coletivo. Saúde coletiva.

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Introduction

The interaction between humans and domestic dogs began over 100 thousand years ago, initially being a utilitarian relationship. It is believed that animals more accustomed to living with humans have gained an adaptive advantage, leaving more descendants (Beaver, 2001). Since then, the relationship between animals and humans has changed, and emotional ties have become increasingly closer, evolving into the term “multispecies family” (Faraco & Seminotti, 2004). As they are part of the family, animals are also in a vulnerable situation, becoming another victim of domestic violence, as well as women, children, and older adults (Nassaro, 2013). Studies that explore the correlation between types of violence began in the ‘60s. However, since the ‘80s, these investigations gained greater intensity, with several scholars highlighting the role of pets as sentinels for domestic violence or future interpersonal violence (Arluke et al., 1999; Arkow, 2000).

Much of the information available regarding the relationship between animal abuse and domestic violence is derived from the reports of individuals in situations of violence, characterizing it as informal evidence. The causes of animal abuse are diverse, from lack of financial resources and information to intentional acts that aim to harm the animal as a form of intimidation, retaliation, punishment, psychological violence, or threat to an individual with a strong emotional bond with the animal (Monsalve et al., 2018). Many women delay requesting help because they are concerned about their pet’s well-being when it remains under the guardianship of the aggressor (Ascione et al., 1997; Ascione et al., 2007).

This work aimed to develop a questionnaire capable of assessing the risk of exposure to violence in a pet owned by a woman in a situation of intimate partner violence. To be answered quickly, it was prepared with a few questions

and standard answers. Based on the risk score for the mistreatment of her animal, the woman in a situation of violence is expected to be aware that her safety and that of other family members are at risk, leading her to seek help.

Materials and Methods

The elaboration of the questionnaire questions was based on a form previously published by Rocha et al. (2020), which aimed to analyze the occurrence of abuse on companion animals protected by families in situations of domestic violence, in addition to a systematic search for theoretical bases, selecting seminal works to understand the relationship between types of violence and pets, probable historical causes related to violence against women and legislation that ensures the rights of animals and women. For this purpose, the PubMed, Google Scholar, and SciELO databases were used. Seven descriptors were used in English and Portuguese, namely: “violence,” “companion animal,” “animal cruelty,” “animal rights,” “questionnaire,” and “Likert five points.” It was decided to use the Likert scale so that it was possible to generate a numerical scale and, based on it, categorize the probable risk of vulnerability.

The questionnaire (Appendix A) consists of nine statements with five possible answers, with only one chosen for each question. From the statements, it is measured how close the pet’s relationship is to the woman in a vulnerable situation, the number of times the animal has been threatened or attacked, and the frequency with which the aggressor uses psychoactive substances.

One (1) point was assigned for “completely disagree,” two (2) points for “partially disagree,” three (3) points for “I don’t know how to answer,” four (4) points for “partially agree” and five (5) points for “completely agree.” Risk categorization was established based on the maximum sum of points and their average, establishing the risk of the animal being mistreated as low (9 to 18 points), medium (19 to 28 points), or high (29 to 45 points).

When asked about the frequency of drug use, the options presented were “never,” “rarely,” “I don’t know how to answer,” “often,” or “always,” giving a score of one (1), two (2), three (3), four (4) and five (5) points, respectively. Although each statement has the same weight, they were presented in order of increasing severity. Less alarming situations are presented at the beginning of the questionnaire. The actual death of the animal or the woman’s feeling that her attacker could kill it was presented at the end.

The objective is for the questionnaire to be self-administered and can be answered anonymously online, through a specific platform or application, or even as a protocol when reporting

at the police station or when receiving reception in centers for women in situations of domestic violence.

Results and Discussion

Despite the increasing frequency of homes where animals are seen by their owners as members of the family, occupying the symbolic role of children or other family members (Faraco & Seminotti, 2004), no studies were found that aimed to assess the risk of pets being exposed to violent situations. Some shelters for battered women have admission forms asking about the presence of pets, but most of them do not ask specifically about their well-being and whether they have been attacked. As reported by Flynn (2000), when interviewing 107 women who had suffered domestic aggression, it was found that 46.5% of them claimed that their pets had been threatened or suffered harm by their partner. Although a relationship directly proportional to the woman's level of emotional attachment to her pet and the chances of it being abused by the aggressor was found, until now, there were no reports on a way to assess the risk to which an animal is exposed.

As demonstrated by Gomes (2021), from the interview of 263 women in situations of violence who owned animals, 64.31% considered them as a member of the family. Due to this strong attachment relationship, the aggressor mistreats animals as a way of punishing, threatening, or retaliating against their partner. In these situations, it is expected that concern for your pet's well-being also causes victims to delay seeking help (Wood et al., 1997; Flynn, 2000). Therefore, the first statement of the questionnaire aims to measure the woman's degree of closeness to her pet, with five (5) points being awarded when it is stated definitively that she considers it a family member.

Animal abuse covers acts of negligence, omission, or intentional damage that can harm the animal's life or well-being (Ascione, 2001). For Arkow & Lockwood (2013), neglect is the failure to provide basic physical, emotional, and veterinary care needs. Statements two and three refer to the aggressor preventing the owner from caring for the pet, from basic needs such as water and food to veterinary care in case of illness or injuries.

As evidenced in the literature, the co-occurrence of domestic violence and threats or harm to your animal can reach 71%, with beatings and psychological abuse being the most frequent types of animal abuse (Ascione et al., 2007; Gomes, 2021). Questions four to six assess the woman's feeling of fear or anguish that her companion can harm the animal, whether she has already threatened to harm it, and whether she has attacked it.

The concept of "cruelty," or active mistreatment, defined by Ascione (1993), is accepted and used to this day as being

"an unacceptable social behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, anguish or death to the animal." Based on what was exposed by Ascione et al. (2007), Volant et al. (2008) in their studies, both comparing a group of women in situations of domestic violence with a group that did not experience such an experience, between 46 and 54% of women in situations of violence interviewed that they owned animals said that their pet had already been threatened, injured, or killed by their attacker, while in the group without violence 12.5% reported such an occurrence. Therefore, statements seven and eight refer to the fear that the aggressor may kill the animal or if an animal has previously been killed.

Although family vulnerability is not a determining factor in abuse, it is considered a risk factor (Gomes, 2021; Scheffer & Munari, 2021). Hence, the frequency with which the aggressor uses legal or illicit drugs, such as alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana, is presented in the last statement. The questionnaire is displayed at the end of the work, based on an image presented as an "Appendix A". The questions were formulated comprehensively, avoiding specifying situations that could cause the woman to not identify with the situation described, resulting in a false final score.

Conclusion

The cycle of violence is a public health problem that demands multidisciplinary work and investment. From the work presented, it can be stated that animals that live with women in situations of violence are vulnerable to suffering from abuse, especially those with a strong attachment to their owner, and often their role as victim is neglected or ignored, many sometimes delaying seeking help because they are worried about their animal's well-being. The proposed questionnaire is aimed at women experiencing domestic violence and aims to identify the risks to which animals are subject. Although it is a pioneering method for assessing the risk of animal violence, it has a solid technical basis. It is believed to be compatible with the reality of the target audience. There is a need for the tool to be tested and adequate so that the assessment of the risk of abuse that a companion animal tutored by a woman in a situation of violence is exposed to is effectively measured.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethics Statement

Study registered with the Research Ethics Committee of the Health Sciences Sector (CEP/SD) at the Universidade Federal do Paraná under the number CAAE 98497518.5.0000.0102 and approved under review number 2.918.857.

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Appendix A – Questionnaire to assess the risk of exposure to violence in a pet owned by a woman in a situation of intimate partner violence

1. I CONSIDER MY PET(S) PET MEMBER(S) OF THE FAMILY:

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

2. MY PARTNER/AGGRESSOR HAS ALREADY FORBIDDEN ME TO GIVE FOOD OR WATER TO MY (S) MY PET(S) ANIMAL(S):

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

3. MY PARTNER/ AGGRESSOR HAS FORBIDDEN ME TO TAKE CARE OF MY (S) ANIMAL (S) SICK PET (S):

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

4.I FEEL FEAR OR ANGUISH WHEN THINKING THAT MY COMPANION/ AGGRESSOR IS ABLE TO DO HARM TO MY (S) PET (S):

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

5. MY PARTNER/AGGRESSOR HAS THREATENED TO HARM (S) MY PET (S):

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

6.MY PARTNER/AGGRESSOR HAS ALREADY HIT OR INJURED MY PET ANIMAL(S):

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

7.I FEEL FEAR OR ANGUISH WHEN THINKING THAT MY PARTNER/AGGRESSOR IS ABLE TO KILL MY PET ANIMAL(S):

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

8.MY PARTNER/AGRESSOR HAS KILLED A PET (MINE OR OTHER PEOPLE):

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

9.MY PARTNER/AGRESSOR USES LICIT OR ILLICIT DRUGS (ALCOHOL, CIGARETTE, MARIJUANA, ETC.):

- a. Always.
- b. Many times.
- c. I can't answer.
- d. Few times.
- e. Never