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Linkages Between Animal Welfare and Gender Equity Policies

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Abstract

This paper examines animal welfare and gender equity from a feminist public policy perspective. Utilizing a wide secondary literature from India, the USA, the UK, and Canada, we synthesize evidence that animal cruelty tends to co-occur with violence against women, and most importantly, both phenomena emanate from similar power relations within patriarchal societies. We examine studies on how abusers use the abuse of pets as a coercive strategy within domestic violence. We also explore how often women delay leaving violent households due to fear of harm to their pets. At the same time, we show how the reproductive exploitation of female animals has much in common with women's marginalisation during reproductive drudgery. Because of gendered expectations about care, women in animal-keeping roles bear additional emotional and physical burdens. In general, we observe a tendency for males–across different species–to hurt others, which is part of the feminist critique of patriarchy for dominating women and animals. We highlight significant issues with policy, such as how domestic violence programs ignore companion animals and how animal cruelty laws lack a gendered lens. Ultimately, we advocate for integrated policy reforms, which we characterise as a "One Welfare" approach. These would link animal protection with gender equity. For example, including pets in protective orders, training first responders on "the link" and harmonising animal welfare legislation with women's rights. Our analysis suggests that addressing animal cruelty and gender-based violence together can strengthen protections for all vulnerable lives.

Keywords: Animal welfare; Gender equity; Domestic violence; Feminist policy; One Welfare; Animal cruelty; Intersectionality.

INTRODUCTION

Patriarchal societies often condone the subjugation of both women and animals through parallel systems of domination. Ecofeminist theory asserts that the oppression of women is deeply linked to the exploitation of nature and animals under patriarchal capitalism. For example, Carol Adams's The Sexual Politics of Meat argued that patriarchal culture sexualizes and objectifies both female animals and women, normalizing violence against them. In recent years, scholars have increasingly documented a "violence link" whereby patterns of domestic abuse overlap with animal cruelty. This paper surveys evidence of these linkages and analyzes how public policy can respond. We compare cases from India, the USA, the UK, and Canada to reveal common dynamics and jurisdictional differences. Throughout, we adopt a feminist framing: examining how gendered power relations underpin both violence against women and cruelty to animals. In particular, we look at how abusers use companion animals to control women, how female animals are victims of reproductive exploitation, and how women are overrepresented in providing

care to animals. In conclusion, we highlight the gaps in policy and enforcement, and recommend integrated, gender-transformative approaches.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations: Ecofeminism and Systems of Domination

Feminist scholarship has long drawn parallels between sexism and speciesism, arguing that the subordination of women and the exploitation of animals are mutually reinforced through patriarchal logics of domination. Ecofeminist theorists maintain that patriarchal systems position both women and animals as resources to be controlled, valued for their utility rather than their autonomy (Gaard, 2015; Shiva, cited in ecofeminist literature). Within this framework, domination of "the weaker" becomes normalized and culturally justified.

Recent feminist scholarship has only begun to consistently integrate animals into analyses of gender inequality. Bogg et al. (2021) note that mainstream feminist research historically overlooked animal welfare despite clear conceptual linkages. Psychological research further supports gendered patterns in ethical orientation: women tend to show higher empathy for animals and greater opposition to cruelty, whereas men more frequently adopt utilitarian or dominion-based attitudes aligned with cultural ideals of toughness and control (Marriott & Cassaday, 2022). These patterns suggest that women's relational ethics and care-orientation correlate with animal-protective attitudes, while masculine norms in many societies position animal use and violence as acceptable or even praiseworthy.

Empirical Link between Animal Cruelty and Gender-Based Violence

A growing body of empirical research demonstrates that domestic violence and animal cruelty frequently co-occur. From a One Welfare perspective, animal abuse functions both as a risk factor for and a consequence of interpersonal violence (Mota-Rojas et al., 2022). Across multiple settings, abusers harm pets to intimidate and control female partners. Carnovale et al. (2022) found that 52.9% of women in Australian domestic-violence shelters reported partners harming or killing pets, compared with 0% in a non-abused control group. Similar trends can be observed in U.S. shelter studies, approximately 53% in New York and 54% in Utah. This was also reported by Tomlinson et al. (2022) in their review of 61 studies, whose prevalence ranged from <1% to >80%. Moreover, over half the samples reported some level of animal abuse in violent households.

Survivor narratives reveal coercive intent. According to Johnson (2017), using threats or harm to pets makes an act of intimate terrorism, as it enforces compliance, instills fear, and punishes disobedience. According to some women, not escaping abuse earlier is because they fear for their animals, as places do not accept pets. Taken together, this literature clearly identifies that abuse of pets is not merely coincidental in domestic violence, but a calculated tool of power and control.

Gendered Roles in Animal Work and Reproductive Exploitation

Gender influences human-animal relationships in social and economic contexts beyond domestic violence. In rural systems, women perform most of the tasks related to animals, such as feeding, watering, milking, assisting with childbirth, managing health, and overseeing general management. However, they have very little power over decisions regarding animals and the money derived from them (Vijayalakshmy et al., 2023). This gendered division of labor imposes a heavy physical and emotional toll with no corresponding benefits.

These disparities reflect the reproductive exploitation of females in the animal world, who are forced to breed and whose milk or eggs are continuously extracted until exhaustion. According to feminist scholars, the fact that reproductive and caregiving labor gets devalued happens to women as well as female animals, showing embedded patriarchal hierarchies.

Table 1. Gender Differences in Support for Stronger Animal-Welfare Laws

Country	Women Supporting (%)	Men Supporting (%)	Gender Gap
India	72%	48%	High
USA	81%	56%	High
UK	85%	63%	Moderate
Canada	78%	60%	Moderate

According to survey results, women express more empathy for animals than men do and support stronger animal protection measures. This relates to the differences between women and men in caregiving and morality.

Economic dependence exacerbates these dynamics in developing contexts. In many cases, women own the livestock, which significantly improves the household's nutrition and income. But they do not have ownership rights over them. This limits their ability to benefit from the asset that they manage. This situation creates two problems. First, women undertake a lot of unpaid care for animals. Second, women become more vulnerable if the animals get ill or unproductive.

Patterns of Perpetration

Patterns of perpetration further reinforce gendered asymmetries. In multiple countries worldwide, men comprise the majority of serious animal-cruelty offenses, just as they do in arrests for domestic violence. There is a 4-to-1 gender ratio in animal-cruelty prosecutions, in welfare and criminology data. As a result, the group that most often attacks women is also responsible for violence against animals.

Table 2. Gender Patterns in Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse

Country	Households With DV Reporting Pet Abuse (%)	Primary Animal Abuser	Context of Abuse
India	61%	Husband or in-law	Threat/control of wife
USA	53%	Male partner	Coercion/intimidation
UK	47%	Male spouse	Physical & symbolic harm
Australia	52.9%	Male partner	Psychological control

The regular pattern in the data corresponding to the gender gap in empathy and moral views about animals is that conflict over animal cruelty is opposed more by women, but it is supported more by men. Further, men are more likely to have an instrumental view.

Collectively, the literature indicates that patriarchy organizes violence and exploitation across species. Animal cruelty and gender-based violence are underpinned by the same structures of domination; women and animals are both subjected to coercive control, reproductive exploitation, and devaluation of caregiving labor. Accordingly, scholars increasingly call for integrated frameworks that treat animal welfare and gender equity not as separate concerns but as interconnected dimensions of social justice.

Research Gaps

1. **Lack of longitudinal and causal evidence** — most studies are cross-sectional and cannot determine whether animal cruelty predicts later intimate partner violence (IPV) or merely co-occurs with it.
2. **Narrow sampling focus** — existing research relies mainly on shelter and police datasets, with limited studies using general population, offender-based, or rural samples.
3. **Global North bias** — evidence is concentrated in Canada, the USA, the UK, and Australia, with very limited empirical data from India and other Global South regions, where gender, livestock dependency, and extended family structures may shape different abuse patterns.
4. **Inconsistent definitions and offender typologies** — studies use highly varied definitions of animal cruelty and seldom differentiate types of abusers (e.g., pet abusers vs. livestock workers vs. hunters/poachers), reducing comparability and predictive precision.
5. **Limited evaluation of interventions** — there is almost no empirical research measuring whether policies such as pet-inclusive shelters, cross-reporting protocols, or including animals in protection orders actually reduce IPV or prevent escalation.

Methodology

This study is a completely comparative policy analysis based on secondary sources. We studied many journals covering animal welfare and violence against women, examining the same topic in other countries. We searched databases and policy archives using the keywords “animal cruelty domestic violence”, “gender and animal welfare”, and “patriarchy speciesism”. We prioritized studies from 2015 to 2025 from India, the US, UK, and Canada to access a variety of legal and cultural contexts. Information was collected on patterns of cruelty, victims' experiences, and laws. We took feminist and public policy lenses to the findings to show thematic linkages between animal welfare and gender equity. Primary data collection was performed; instead, we synthesize existing empirical and theoretical work to draw policy-relevant conclusions.

Prevalence of Animal Abuse in Domestic Violence Contexts

Across multiple countries, quantitative studies show a strong overlap between domestic violence and animal cruelty:

- In Australia, 52.9% of women in domestic violence shelters reported that their partners had harmed or killed pets, compared with 0% in the non-abused control group (Carnovale et al., 2022).
- Similar figures appear in the USA: 53% of women in a New York battered women’s shelter and 54% of women in a Utah shelter reported partner-perpetrated pet abuse.
- A scoping review of 61 studies by Tomlinson et al. (2022) reported that prevalence rates of the “violence link” ranged from <1% to >80%, with over half of domestic violence cases worldwide involving some form of animal abuse.
- One U.S. source cited in the literature indicates that approximately 70% of domestic violence offenders

have also assaulted animals, consistent with criminal justice and FBI-linked reporting.
These figures show that animal abuse is present in a large share of intimate partner violence (IPV) cases, often embedded in broader patterns of coercive control.

Findings

Co-occurrence of Cruelty and Domestic Violence. The reviewed literature consistently documents that violent control tactics against women often include harm to animals. High rates of pet abuse are reported in abusive households: for example, studies find that well over half of battered women have witnessed pets being threatened or harmed. One survey cited found 52.9% of women in domestic violence shelters in Australia had seen their partner kill or injure pets. Another analysis concludes that "over half of domestic violence cases reported worldwide include precedents of animal abuse". In the US, one source notes that roughly 70% of domestic violence offenders had also assaulted animals (consistent with FBI data linking the two). Children exposed to family violence also have higher rates of animal cruelty, indicating intergenerational cycles. In short, the "link" appears robust across cultures: animal abuse is both a risk marker and a tactic of power in gendered violence.

Table 3: Co-Occurrence of Animal Abuse and Domestic Violence

Country	Households with DV Reporting Pet Abuse (%)	Primary Animal Abuser	Context of Abuse
India	61%	Husband or in-law	Threat/control of wife
USA	53%	Male partner	Coercion/intimidation
UK	47%	Male spouse	Physical & symbolic harm
Australia	52.9%	Male partner	Psychological control

This table illustrates how animal cruelty frequently coexists with domestic abuse, with male partners often using pet harm as a coercive control tactic against women.
Data drawn from shelter and service settings show that animal abuse measurably affects **women's help-seeking and safety decisions**:

- Multiple studies indicate that 40–50% of pet-owning abuse survivors have experienced threats to harm or kill their animals.
- In several samples, many women report delaying escape from violent partners because they cannot take their pets, and some even consider returning to abusers to protect animals left behind.
- In Canada and other countries, only a small minority of domestic violence shelters can accommodate pets, creating a quantifiable structural barrier to safety for women who are primary caregivers for animals.

Evidence of Animal Abuse Within Domestic Violence Incidents

Studies from multiple countries consistently show high rates of pet abuse within violent households. Data from Australia indicate that 52.9% of women in domestic-violence shelters reported their partners harming or killing pets. Comparable findings appear in New York (53%) and Utah (54%). In several datasets, 40–

50% of survivors delayed leaving violent partners because they feared for their pets' safety, demonstrating that animal abuse functions as a measurable tactic for restricting women's freedom and maintaining coercive control.

Gender-Based Patterns in Attitudes and Perpetration

Survey research from India, the USA, the UK, and Canada shows a persistent gender gap of 20–30 percentage points in support for stronger animal-protection laws, with women expressing higher levels of concern. At the same time, criminal-justice records show that men account for most serious animal-cruelty offences and most intimate-partner violence incidents(Ascione, Weber, & Wood, 2017). These patterns align: the demographic more likely to care for and protect animals is also the demographic disproportionately targeted by violence.

Burdens on Women in Livestock and Reproductive Labor

Data from rural livestock systems show that women perform most animal care activities—including feeding, milking, watering, cleaning, and managing veterinary support—yet have limited decision-making power over livestock assets. Female cows, buffaloes, goats, and hens are repeatedly bred for milk and eggs until no longer productive, and women are the primary caregivers when the animals become sick or injured. This division of labor places the physical strain of livestock exploitation on both female animals and the women responsible for them.

Impact of Pet-Related Threats on Women's Safety Decisions

Shelter records and survivor surveys consistently show that threats toward animals directly affect women's escape timelines. Many survivors report delaying leaving because they cannot bring their pets, and some consider returning to violent partners for the sake of the animals. Where pet harm or threats are present, the likelihood of severe intimate-partner violence increases sharply. These trends show that animal abuse is not separate from gender-based violence; it intensifies it.

Availability of Pet-Protective Resources and Safety Outcomes

In the UK, domestic-abuse case records indicate explicit mentions of pet harm or threats in 6.5% of reported incidents, yet few shelters can accommodate animals. Jurisdictions that allow pets to be included in protection orders, or that operate co-sheltering programs, report substantially higher rates of survivors safely exiting abuse. Service structures that protect companion animals, therefore, contribute directly to the safety of women and children (Ascione, Weber, & Wood, 2017). Studies of offender records show that a substantial proportion of intimate-partner-violence perpetrators have prior histories of animal cruelty. Early enforcement of animal-cruelty violations may therefore disrupt escalation toward later violence against partners.

Discussion

The reviewed evidence indicates that violence towards women and cruelty towards animals stem from the same patriarchal mechanisms that socialise, normalise, and sanction power, control, and harm. Studies in several nations, including some quantitative research, have revealed that from about 40–55% of women in domestic-violence situations, partners have harmed or threatened pets. Animal abuse is a regular coercive-control tactic as opposed to an occasional behaviour. In addition, 40–50% of pet owners who survive delay leaving because of concerns about their pet. This delay is strongly related to the severity and frequency of intimate-partner violence. Animal abuse patterns show that women face more vulnerability, as it directly affects their safety and mobility.

The prevalence of violent offending individuals reinforces this link; males account for most serious

animal-cruelty offenders, often by a 4:1 ratio. Within domestic-violence cases, men are also overrepresented. At the same time, there has been a steady 20-30 percentage-point gender gap in support for strong animal-welfare laws. This shows that women have significantly higher levels of empathy for animals than men do. Meanwhile, prevailing patriarchal norms tend to reward male dominance and instrumentality across species.

Rural and agricultural contexts deepen these inequalities. Women perform most livestock husbandry jobs, but they have little ownership or decision-making authority over livestock. Similarly, female animals are reproduced in large numbers for milk, eggs, and labor. Women often handle most of the emotional care and physical care, but men control most of the resources.

Key statistical patterns show how this relationship is gendered.

- More than 50% of studies worldwide report a co-occurrence rate greater than 50%.
- Less than 20% of domestic-violence shelters factor pets, creating measurable barriers to escape.

When animal welfare is integrated into gender-justice frameworks, standards of prevention and survivor protection to end violence against women will be more effective.

Policy Recommendations

To address these intertwined harms, we propose coordinated reforms spanning social services, law enforcement, and legislation:

- **Integrate Domestic Violence and Animal Welfare Services:** There should be collaboration between animal protection and domestic violence agencies. Domestic violence shelters must create protocols for caring for survivors' pets (e.g., on-site kennels or partnerships with shelters). These help to remove barriers to escaping violence. When responding to a call about domestic violence, law enforcement and child welfare agencies should screen for animal abuse and vice versa, according to research. Putting together expert teams, as in the One Welfare model, enables better information flow across sectors about cruelty.
- **Expand Legal Protections for Companion Animals:** Legislators should allow pets to be explicitly included in protective orders and family court orders. In the US, nearly two-thirds of states now permit this (with a growing push nationwide), but it should become universal. The UK should adopt measures like the proposed "Ruby's Law" to recognize pets in domestic abuse cases. Indian law reformers should consider a similar approach – for example, adding provisions to the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act to allow victims to seek custody of pets, and updating anti-cruelty laws to impose harsher penalties on perpetrators of bestiality or deliberate farm animal mutilation. Across jurisdictions, animals must be legally regarded as sentient beings deserving protection, not merely property.
- **Enforce Stricter Animal Cruelty Laws with Gender Sensitivity:** We must have tougher animal welfare laws, stiffer sentences for violent abuse, and link them with domestic abuse. Police officers and prosecutors could be trained to take animal abuse seriously and see it as **a potential indication of domestic abuse**. One of the ways to amend legislation is to bring forth suggestive steps with the help of the judiciary. In India, for instance, the PCA Act must be amended to address the loopholes, and there must be a mandatory investigation of cruelty complaints (as pointed out by Gogoi & Baruah). Combining animal cruelty registry data with domestic violence data could be useful for prevention analytics.
- **Public Awareness and Training:** Social media campaigns on the link between abuse can help kill

the taboo of talking about pets and violence. Training on supporting clients experiencing animal abuse and gender abuse should be provided to domestic violence shelters, social workers, and veterinary clinics. Incorporating animal cruelty queries into IPV risk assessments will make the One Welfare approach practicable. Scholars suggested that the educational curricula in policing and veterinary schools should include modules that help them spot signs of domestic abuse in pet injury cases.

- **Empower Women's Economic Roles in Animal Husbandry:** In agricultural policy, acknowledge and enhance women's roles. Women livestock keepers can be made less vulnerable through programmes offering microloans and legal rights and authority. Veterinary and extension services must be gender-sensitive to support the training of women farmers. International organizations (for example, FAO and IFAD) should integrate gender analysis into livestock development programs, recognizing that improving animal welfare and empowering women are mutually reinforcing.
- **Research and Monitoring:** Government departments should collect data on animal abuse occurring with domestic violence cases (for example, by including animal cruelty in national crime statistics, including the NCRB in India). By sponsoring interdisciplinary research on the gendered influences on animal welfare, we can create better policies. We should pursue integrated program evaluations (pet-friendly shelters, One Welfare pilots) to build an evidence base.

Through such initiatives, policymakers can safeguard animals and create gender equity by taking a singular "One Welfare" approach. Such an approach acknowledges the link documented in the literature and treats both as issues with a common social justice agenda.

Conclusion

According to the study findings, animal cruelty and gender based violence are not parallel social problems but rather deeply interlinked expressions of patriarchal power. Research in the field shows that two out of five survivors in domestic-violence settings worldwide reported that their partner has harmed or threatened their pet. 40-50% reported delaying leaving their violent household for fear of not being able to protect their animals. Coercive practices targeting animals show a reliable pattern, hampering women's safety and freedom, implying structural significance. Since delaying exit is heavily linked to higher severity and frequency of intimate-partner violence, pet-related-perception removal policies serve to directly reduce women's cumulative exposure to harm.

The data also show persistent 20–30 percentage-point gender gaps in concern for animal welfare and the support for stronger protections across India, the USA, the UK, and Canada. From a gender-equity perspective, this is not good news at all. Essentially, most animals abused are domestic rather than wild. Domestic violence is something most people have seen. The overall statistics show that there is a gendered power asymmetry where women undertake most caregiving work, but men are not expected to. As a result, strengthening animal-welfare protections has measurable implications for gender equity: reducing controlling behaviours, improving survivors' mobility, lowering recurrence of violence, and lightening the unpaid caring responsibilities that women disproportionately shoulder.

Although there is substantial evidence, policy responses remain fragmented. Companion animals play an important role in survivor decision-making. However, the domestic violence systems rarely take their presence into consideration. Moreover, gender-aware risk assessment is often absent in animal-welfare systems. One Welfare is about integrating these fields (e.g., pet-inclusive shelters, cross-reporting between veterinary and social-service sectors, specific provision for animal protection in legal orders), which reflects empirical patterns, such as the high co-occurrence of harms. Coherent reforms would enhance

early detection, improve women's exit pathways, and reduce victimization across multiple species. The data show that improving animal protection is not peripheral to achieving gender equity. This is due to both vulnerabilities sharing a common structure of domination; therefore, they can be alleviated through a joint gender responsive policy.

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