

The Cat(s and Dogs) Came Back

Millions of strays in Cairo pose a threat to the city

By Margaret Faust

Maha Boulos honks the horn of her dark red Matrix. Three dogs trot out of the shadows and come up to the car. Boulos' daughter, Mariam Hathout, gets out of the back seat and pets Bullet, Gilgil and Simba. She scratches behind their ears while cooing words of affection.

Boulos and Hathout know these dogs, and the dogs know them. Every day at 4:30, the two women drive the streets of the Cairo neighborhood Zamalek and feed at least eight dogs and more than a dozen cats. Their regular loop includes stopping at the Aquarium Grotto Garden to feed some cats before passing by the German Embassy where three dogs will be waiting at the next corner. Boulos has dry food for the cats and homemade rice and minced chicken to feed the dogs.

Hathout says, "Once you start, you cannot back off because the poor souls ... they wait for you every day and depend on you, so you can't let them down."

Stray dogs and cats in Cairo are a threat to the health and safety of humans and other animals. Often victims of abuse, the animals can have a low quality of life. But thanks to activists and new legislation, things are looking up.

Hathout and Boulos are not feeding these stray animals alone. In 2016, the mother-daughter duo, along with two other people, founded a community group called Friends of Zamalek Stray Animals, which now has more than 2,000 members. Together, they feed, play with, and love the strays.

Sometimes on their daily rides around town, Boulos and Hathout encounter an unfamiliar face. When they see a new stray, they take a detour and bring the animal to the El Gezira Pet Clinic. There, Veterinary Surgeon Dr. Ahmed Shawky assesses each case. Shawky says he cares for 6 to 10 stray pets a day. He has carried out 80 surgeries on stray animals in four months. He predicts there are at least 200 stray dogs and more than 3,000 stray cats in Zamalek alone. As for Cairo, he guesses it's in the millions. Shawky explains that with millions of strays comes millions of problems. First, unvaccinated animals carry diseases.

According to a report written by Abdel Hamid Kamal, a former member of the local administration committee in the House of Representatives, dogs transmit more than 30 diseases to humans, the most dangerous of which is rabies. Kamal's report also says there have been 400,000 dog bites to date. That is 100,000 more than there were four years ago.

Animals, especially dogs, bite when they are aggressive, and this usually happens if there are too many alpha males in one place. Unless they are being fed by neighbors, animals congregate at neighborhood trash piles to scavenge for food. Shawky explains that when multiple alphas come together, like at the trash piles, they become aggressive.

"If an intruder just enters that territory, he will not be welcomed. He will be treated with hostility," Dr. Shawky says.

Many alpha males at a trash pile points to a bigger issue. Shawky says that the excess of strays causes them poor quality of life. The exact number of stray animals in Cairo is unknown. Some veterinary experts estimate there is anywhere from 16 million to 60 million stray dogs in Egypt and far more stray cats. Dina Zulfikar, certified civil society community coordinator with General Authority For Veterinary Services (GAVS) says tracking the number of stray cats and dogs in Egypt is nearly impossible.

Noise is also a problem. As dogs scrounge for food at night, they bark, growl, and howl, which can disturb residents trying to sleep. Dr. Shawky says people's patience is thin, especially in gated communities.

“They try to fence themselves somehow. Like they want to keep the bubble and they paid a load of money to be there. And it just doesn't make sense to them that, ‘I've paid like 2 million for a residential unit and I can't sleep.’ So they just complain, complain, complain, complain,” Shawky says.

People have two options when a loud stray dog is bothering them. One is to take violent action. Shawky says he sees dogs who are hit by cars or beaten with stones. He remembers one of the first strays he treated was a dog named Baraqoe. Someone had thrown acid on his eye. But Shawky says the most common form of abuse is poison, usually by strychnine. The white odorless powder is technically forbidden but it is readily available.

Shawky says people will defend their abuse towards the animals. “If you go to someone and try to negotiate with 'em...He will defend his point of view. ‘Cause he's noisy.’ He doesn't even know that there are souls, there are animals, they have lives, they have needs, they have instinct.”

The second option is to call the government. GAVS is supposed to call vets when they get a complaint about a stray animal, so the vet can catch, neuter, and release the animal. Dr. Shawky says he has never gotten a call like this. If he did, he would be happy to comply.

“It could be a win-win situation. Like the animals are being well cared for. The population number will reduce and the aggressiveness in the males [will too],” Dr. Shawky says.

Dr. Shawky suspects there is an explanation to this. He says that calling vets takes time and energy on the government's part. So instead, the government buys strychnine, mixes it into food for the animals, and poisons them to death.

Zulfikar, who works closely with GAVS, confirms that the Egyptian government poisons stray animals.

Hathout, Shawky, and Zulfikar all paint a clear picture: there are millions of stray animals roaming the streets of Cairo. They become aggressive, loud, and dangerous. While systems are in place to humanely solve the problem, often, aggressive and deadly action is taken instead. They say there are three key steps to improving the lives of stray animals.

Shawky says the solution is population control. With fewer stray animals, food competition decreases, animals will become less defensive, and animals and people will be able to coexist better. Neutering stray animals along with vaccinating them is his top priority. Simply put, "The fewer, there are the better quality of life they will have," Shawky says.

Zulfikar says the last key is implementing legislative reform. In 2015, United Nations Member States, including Egypt, adopted the Sustainable Development Goals. Goal number three is called good health and well-being. It applies to both humans and animals. Although this goal was adopted in 2015, she is only now seeing it being implemented. "It's a good start because changing an attitude of a country takes years. It will not take place in one year or two years," Zulfikar says.

She believes this can be achieved through nationwide vaccination efforts and humane population control. Dr. Shawky agrees and adds that he is optimistic things will improve thanks to people like Boulos and Hathout who are enacting change on a local level.