

Child Protection in International Nonprofits

According to UNICEF, child protection refers to the prevention and response to violence, exploitation, and abuse of children in all contexts.

International nonprofits are particularly vulnerable to child abuse due to their client populations and the nature of working in international, cross-cultural settings. They face a host of challenges including fragile governments, weak rule of law, ambiguous jurisdictions, communication & cultural differences, etc. While many organizations have caring staff and compassionate missions, they may not be aware or able to handle threats and less-than-obvious situations of abuse.

There are two main areas where abuse can occur:

- Sexual or physical abuse from within by staff, volunteers, or children
- Sexual or physical abuse by individuals off-site (e.g. doctors, parents, off-duty staff, community members, etc.) or on the internet

“Every child needs punishment to grow. Yes, I beat. The harder you beat, the better he will learn what you are teaching.”
Teacher, Uganda¹

Nonprofits need to know how to respond to abuse accusations both for the safety of the child they serve and for the organization’s continuing existence. In a recent survey, approximately 1 in 8 international nonprofits have been forced to deal with accusations of child abuse at their organization.³

It is easy for organizations to feel secure and confident. However, the nonprofit may be unaware that abuse is occurring. Many reasons exist for this. Nonprofits may not know of abuse because :

“We do not feel free at school when teachers demand sex in exchange for good grades”

Girl, Liberia²

- Individuals are afraid to report (taboos, stigma, fear of being fired, etc.)
- Individuals do not know how or where to report
- No common understanding of abuse exists
- Abuse was reported but no action was taken

Many international nonprofits do not have strong child protection mechanisms in place to adequately prevent and handle abuse. As a minimum, organizations should have:

- A child protection (“safeguarding”) policy
- An abuse reporting mechanism
- Hiring practices that vet staff and volunteer candidates
- A code of conduct signed by staff & volunteers
- Personnel assigned and trained to deal with child protection
- Training for staff, volunteers, and children on child protection and abuse

2014 Child Protection Survey of International Nonprofits³

38% Have a child protection “Safeguarding” Policy

39% Train the site staff in child protection

40% Regularly used criminal background checks to vet employees

31% Regularly used criminal background checks to vet volunteers

13% Were aware of suspected abuse at their organization

25% Were aware of suspected abuse at an organization similar to theirs

“NGO workers bring a lot of young girls to the boarding school where they run the training. The trainers abuse the girls and then some of them [the girls] leave pregnant.”

Girl, South Sudan⁴

¹ Report: “Violence Against Children” 2005.

² Report: “A World Without Violence Against Children” 2014.

³ Unpublished. Travis, Amy. 2015. Note: Surveyed orgs. focused on “youth.”

⁴ Report; “No One to Turn To” 2008.