CHILD ABUSE AS AN INTERNATIONAL ISSUE

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Abstract—This paper provides a background and suggests a strategy for an international approach to policy development concerning child abuse. First, child abuse is defined in a way that makes it applicable across cultures and national boundaries as that portion of harm to children that results from human action that is proscribed, proximate and preventable. A number of other dimensions, such as the degree of social sanction or social censure, are outlined that also affect the likelihood that given harm will be regarded as child abuse. Cross-cultural research also reveals that certain categories of children—such as those in poor health, females, unwanted children and those born under difficult circumstances or with disvalued traits or under conditions of rapid socioeconomic change—are more vulnerable to maltreatment in many countries. The paper argues for a two-pronged international strategy that first urges individual countries to make a priority of the particular types of abuse that are in most urgent need of attention in their society as well as participating at the same time in a concertated international focus on three widely occurring forms of child abuse: parental child battering, selective neglect, and sexual abuse.

CHILD ABUSE arose as a social issue primarily in the developed countries of the Western world. But with time, there has been increasing recognition that it exists in some form virtually everywhere, in developing and developed countries, in the East as well as in the West [1-5]. International organizations in recent years have started to build international awareness about child abuse [6-10], but this effort is still in its embryonic stage. This paper provides a background and suggests a strategy for an international approach to policy development concerning child abuse. It is divided into three sections: First, child abuse is defined in a way that makes it applicable across cultures and national boundaries. Second, the major types of child abuse are described with illustrations of their international scope. And third, criteria are proposed for determining international policy priorities, and some examples are given of types of international initiatives that might be undertaken.

DEFINING CHILD ABUSE

A definition of child abuse that can be used internationally should accomplish at least two objectives: (1) It should distinguish child abuse clearly from other social, economic, and health problems of international concern; and (2) it should be sufficiently flexible to
apply to a range of situations in a variety of social and cultural contexts. Some of what is talked about as child abuse in Western contexts has little meaning in other societie.

Child abuse is not simply any harm that befalls children. Children throughout the world suffer from a multitude of harms—malnutrition, starvation, infectious disease, congenital defects, abandonment, economic exploitation, the violence of warfare, to name a few. Not all harm that befalls children is child abuse. Child abuse is one harm among many.

We propose the following way of defining child abuse: CHILD ABUSE IS THE PORTION OF HARM TO CHILDREN THAT RESULTS FROM HUMAN ACTION THAT IS PROScribed, PROXIMATE, AND PREVENTABLE. There is an important rationale for each part of this definition.

1. **Results from.** The concept of child abuse implies a focus on cause. Only harms of a particular type of causation are included. This differentiates concern about child abuse from concern about other harms to children. For example, malnutrition and infectious disease are primarily defined by symptoms, whatever the cause. In the case of child abuse, however, knowledge of symptoms is not enough. To know simply that a harm resulted—for example, that a child died or a child got sick—is not sufficient to make a judgment of child abuse. We must know what the cause of the death or illness was as well. Because it involves an analysis of causes in conjunction with consequences, child abuse is a complex concept.

2. **Human action.** A first limitation on the type of harm that constitutes child abuse is that it is harm resulting from human action [11]. This excludes a broad range of harm that stems primarily from what are generally called "natural causes"—children who are killed or injured by storms, earthquakes, floods; and children who are killed or sickened by diseases, droughts, or congenital defects. Of course, many harms have some combination of human and natural causes. Droughts are complicated by political actions. Disease is fostered by bad health conditions. In child abuse, the preponderant and necessary cause needs to be human action.

3. **Proscribed.** Not all human action that causes harm is child abuse. It only qualifies as such if the human action is negatively valued at the same time that it causes harm. Thus when children are harmed in the course of human actions that are generally approved of—for example, a surgical procedure that turns out badly—it is not considered child abuse. Even human actions of a generally neutral nature—for example, driving a car—are not considered child abuse when they cause harm to a child, unless there was something proscribed about the manner of the action, i.e., the driving was reckless or negligent. As can be seen from this illustration, it is the negative valuation of the action—its deviance, its harmful intent, its violations of legal codes or social expectations—that renders the action child abuse. This takes on particular importance in a cross-cultural perspective on child abuse because proscribed behaviors vary from society to society.

4. **Proximate.** When human action results in harm to children, sometimes it is fairly far removed in time or in space. If this action is too far removed, it generally falls outside the parameters of child abuse. Thus human action may have denuded the land and caused a drought two generations later that resulted in child starvation. But the human action is too distant for it to be considered child abuse. In general, actions resulting in child abuse have to be quite proximate. Most of what is considered child abuse involves actions of immediate caretakers and those in the child's immediate environment that result directly in harm to the child; for example, violence, sexual acts on the child, deprivation of immediate needs. There is also some willingness to consider as child abuse actions that have fairly direct harmful consequences for children but that are not quite so proximate: for example, a governmental act that
forces children into economic servitude. But in general, the more proximate the action, the more it complies with the definition of child abuse.

5. Preventable. Inherent in the notion of child abuse is the idea that some alternative course of human action was potentially available that would have avoided the harm. Thus if a child in a developing country with few medical resources contracts meningitis and parents helplessly watch the child die because they know of no remedy, this is not child abuse. If parents facing the same disease in a developed country with accessible medical resources watch the child die without obtaining medical intervention, this would constitute child abuse. In fact, such a situation would fall within a subcategory of child abuse termed medical neglect [12-14]. The relative preventability of the harm in the second case is what makes the action abusive.

The criteria we have specified, illustrated in Figure 1, here go some distance toward demarcating the general types of harms to children that qualify as child abuse. But they by no means provide a complete guide to distinguishing what is and what is not abuse, especially in an international framework where norms and behaviors can vary so widely. Child abuse is a complex concept with many considerations that affect its boundaries. The concept has many gray areas and matters of controversy, situations that some observers might consider child abuse and others not. We have identified six additional dimensions, summarized in Table 1, that appear to influence the application of the notion of child abuse in an international framework.

**Dimensions of Child Abuse**

**Dimension 1: Intentionality.** Human acts which cause child abuse differ in the degree to which they are intentional, that is, in the degree to which they have as their goal the infliction of pain or injury or harm on the child. When a mother burns a child's fingers for stealing, the harm is very intentional. When a child loses a finger working for pennies in an unsafe, overcrowded factory, abuse may have occurred, but the abusive factory owner

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**Figure 1. Definition of child abuse.**
Table 1. Dimensions Influencing Whether a Harm is Child Abuse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Clearly Child Abuse</th>
<th>Least Clearly Child Abuse</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intentional acts</td>
<td>Unintentional acts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts that are socially censured in locale where they occur</td>
<td>Acts that have some degree of social approval in locale where they occur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts whose abusiveness is a matter of international consensus</td>
<td>Acts whose abusiveness is a matter of international disagreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts perpetrated by individuals</td>
<td>Acts perpetrated by organizations, governments, and society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harms suffered solely by children as a group</td>
<td>Harms experienced by children together with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts against children who are clearly endowed with personhood</td>
<td>Acts against children who are not yet socially endowed with personhood</td>
</tr>
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or manager was not intending to harm the child; the goal was to make money or get more work out of the child. Acts of intentional harm are easier to qualify as child abuse. But most experts in the field do agree that acts of unintended harm can also qualify.

**Dimension II: Social sanction vs. social censure.** The kinds of acts considered child abuse are generally those that are reprehensible in a particular society and may differ from place to place depending on local standards and norms. For example, branding a child as a form of punishment would be considered to greatly exceed the cultural norms for child rearing in the United States. But in some tribal societies, facial and body scarification is highly valued as a sign of the child's transformation to adulthood, and parents who fail to have their sons so marked would be labelled abusive or neglectful [15-17]. In part, local standards affect how the children feel about the treatment they receive. Whether children see the behavior as being deviant or normative may influence how they react to that behavior and therefore whether it is abusive [2]. Children who sleep in separate rooms from their parents will not feel neglected if this is the norm in their culture; they may if it is not. The more a behavior violates cultural norms, the more it is likely to be defined as child abuse.

However, at the same time we caution that child abuse is not simply a "culturally relative" concept. There do appear to be some absolute standards that exist apart from local norms. A good example might be the allegation of the use of young children in Iran to clear minefields as reported by the media. Locally, these children may be regarded as martyrs and heroes, and there is little local censure of the adults who recruit and use children for these purposes. Nonetheless, there is a substantial degree of international consensus that this is an egregious form of child abuse. International concern about clitoridectomy and infibulation of young girls in Sub-Saharan Africa reflects another situation where much international opinion sees children as abused in spite of local support for a behavior [18]; when culturally accepted practices increase morbidity and certain standards are violated, abuse is thought to occur whether or not local standards agree [19].

Undoubtedly the international community needs to be as clear as possible about these international standards. Unfortunately ethnocentrism may prevail in one culture's judgment of another culture's child rearing. The element of demonstrable serious physical harm is certainly one component of any international standard.

**Dimension III: International consensus.** The discussion of Dimension II illustrates that abusive actions can be arrayed according to how much agreement there is in the international community about their abusiveness. There seems to be a fair degree of international consensus that using a child to detonate land mines is abuse. Thus even though some
Iranian factions may support it, the larger world community does not. Other practices are considered abuse locally, but not necessarily in the world community.

One might infer from this discussion that international consensus should be a crucial criteria for international definitions of child abuse. However, consensus is only one criteria. Professional and scientific knowledge about child development also have an important contribution. Practices about which there is not international political agreement may nonetheless be defined as child abuse if regarded as such by enough international professional and scientific opinion.

**Dimension IV: Societal vs. individual causation.** Child abuse has both societal and individual roots, but some forms are more than others the result of actions of social organizations—governments, large organizations, or religious doctrines rather than individuals. For example, the claim that mothers in developing countries were being encouraged by large international baby formula companies to forego breast feeding and that this resulted in many child deaths and illnesses is an example of “socially induced” child abuse. Contrast this with a middle class mother who fails to adequately nurse her child because she is depressed. Social conditions influence her behavior, but assuming, as is usually the case, that this mother is aware of her child’s lack of growth, then her behavior can be said to be more individually than socially caused.

In general, acts caused by individuals are more likely to be considered child abuse than those caused by organizations and society. This is certainly related to the “proximity” principle described earlier. But of importance is the recognition that governmental, economic and religious actions can constitute forms of child abuse. Moreover, we must not lose sight of the social components even to abuse that seems more “individually” caused.

**Dimension V: Children as sole victims vs. children as joint victims.** When children are abused, often it is by activities and practices that single children out from the rest of the community. But children are also victimized by practices that victimize large groups of individuals, adults and children alike. Innocent children are killed in war, for example, along with innocent men and women. In general, the concept of child abuse is more reasonably applied to circumstances that victimize children alone. However, some collective victimizations are also considered child abuse, especially when they affect children in a somewhat different way than adults. Child prostitution, for example, has some presumably different dynamics than adult prostitution due to the children’s sexual inexperience and inability to protect themselves.

**Dimension VI: Personhood of the child.** A complication in defining child abuse is that societies have different notions about when a child is endowed with personhood or becomes human. This poses problems in classifying actions toward fetuses, newborns, and very young children. Some societies regard a child as human at the time of conception. Harmful acts to the fetus during pregnancy—abortion, for example—would be classified as child abuse. Other societies regard a child as human at the time of quickening. Early abortion is not considered child abuse, but destruction of a viable child is. At the other end, some societies do not regard a child as human until some minutes or hours after birth, until a child first cries or first nurses. In such a society, a child killed at birth might be considered no more abused than a fetus terminated through early abortion in the second type of society.

Obviously, the further a child from conception, the more likely a society will accord the child personhood and the more likely that abuse will be considered to have occurred. But
some infanticide—particularly that which occurs in the first minutes after birth—even though in the West it may be regarded as child abuse, may be more properly regarded in local context as a form of fertility regulation. The child being killed is not yet a child. This needs to be kept in mind in discussions of infanticide and its relationship to child abuse. This discussion illustrates some of the complexities involved in defining child abuse in an international context. Clearly, there are many factors that must be taken into account. Nonetheless, child abuse is a powerful concept that can be the basis for strong international action. The international community needs to address the task of defining child abuse and promote global discussion and reflection that will best refine this concept and make it internationally meaningful.

TYPES OF CHILD ABUSE

In the West where the label of child abuse developed, distinctions commonly are made among four main categories: physical abuse, physical neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional (or psychological) abuse. This typology can be applied in an international context, but the content of each category may vary when considered cross-culturally. A brief definition of each of these types is useful.

Definition of Types of Abuse

Physical abuse. Physical abuse is defined as violence and other nonaccidental, proscribed human actions that inflict pain on a child and are capable of causing injury or permanent impairment to development or functioning.

Physical neglect. Physical neglect is defined as the deprivation or nonprovision of necessary and societally available resources due to proximate and proscribed human actions that create the risk of permanent impairment to development or functioning.

Sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is defined as any sexual contact between an adult and a sexually immature (sexual maturity is socially as well as physiologically defined) child for purposes of the adult’s sexual gratification; or any sexual contact to a child made by the use of force, threat, or deceit to secure the child’s participation; or sexual contact to which a child is incapable of consenting by virtue of age or power differentials and the nature of the relationship with the adult [20].

This definition clearly includes sex between a child and his/her parental or institutional caretakers. It also encompasses sexual activity with a child in exchange for purely economic or monetary gain, such as child prostitution or pornography.

It is important to stress the kinds of activity that are not sexual abuse. For example, in some cultures very young children’s genitals may be fondled to calm them or lull them to sleep. This would not be abuse because it is not for the purposes of the adult’s sexual gratification [21].

Emotional or psychological abuse and neglect. There is substantial disagreement about how to define this concept and what elements of it to differentiate. Garbarino and colleagues define it as “the willful destruction or significant impairment of a child’s competence through such acts as the punishment of attachment behavior, punishment of self-esteem, and punishment of behaviors needed for normal social interaction” [22]. Following their work, we would include at least the following components:
1. Rejecting, i.e., the chronic denigration of the child, the child’s qualities, capacities and desires;
2. Isolating, i.e., the deprivation of access to social contact and resources necessary for normal development as a member of one’s culture;
3. Terrorizing, i.e., the chronic threatening of abandonment or grave bodily, social, or supernatural harm;
4. Ignoring, i.e., the chronic deprivation of parental attention and responsiveness necessary for the child’s development;
5. Corrupting, i.e., subjecting a child to deviant child care practices in relation to the rest of the society such that the child experiences severe impairment in ability to function socially. (This is specifically meant to exclude situations of alternative lifestyles, such as the Amish in the United States, whose child-rearing practices depart from the mainstream but do not impair a child’s ability to function socially.);
6. Adultifying, i.e., excessive age-inappropriate demands on the child that the child cannot meet.

SPECIFIC TYPES OF CHILD ABUSE IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

While child abuse can take innumerable forms, certain ones have been more prominently described and addressed. In this section, we will enumerate some of these major forms that have been noted by the international community and give a brief description of the phenomenon.

Physical Child Abuse

Parental child battering. This is the phenomenon of parents who nonaccidentally inflict injuries on their children, most often through beatings with hands and objects [23]. One common context for this type of abuse is in overzealous physical punishment. Estimates from the U.S. suggest that each year approximately 2% of all children face potentially serious harm from violent parental acts [24]. Estimates from European countries show similar rates. The incidence and prevalence of parental child battering cross-culturally is not known, but it is reported in a wide range of societies [25-38].

Institutional child battering. This form of child abuse also involves nonaccidentally inflicted injuries, but here they are committed within institutions such as schools, day care centers, and orphanages. Child abuse has been identified in such institutions in developed and developing nations [25, 39 40].

Child homicide. Children may be killed for a number of economic, religious, cultural or personal reasons. Some die as the result of inflicted beatings without homicidal intent. Some are also killed because they are socially or religiously stigmatized, for example, born out of wedlock or seriously deformed. In the U.S., younger child homicides tend to be the result of parental beatings, while older children die from gunshot and knife wounds inflicted by nonfamily members [41].

Children caught in intergroup hostilities. This includes children who are captured, tortured, or killed in tribal conflicts, family feuds, in addition to civil and international warfare. Sometimes the children are inadvertent victims. Other times they are intentionally harmed as a form of attack or retaliation on their community. Prior to pacification in
Papua New Guinea, for example, men, women, and children alike were considered legitimate victims to avenge the death of a member of a warring group. Under the military regime in Argentina, children, like adults, joined the ranks of “the disappeared” who were presumably tortured and murdered, sometimes in front of their parents. Sometimes the harm comes because the children are conscripted to fight. In conflict zones around the world, large numbers of children become vulnerable, with death a frequent outcome.

Children permanently impaired by culturally prescribed rituals and child-rearing practices. Some culturally accepted rituals and child-rearing practices hold the potential for serious permanent harm and even death to children. An example of this is the practice of female clitoridectomy and infibulation that involves millions of children in Africa and the Middle East [18, 42-46]. Elsewhere, children may be given harmful substances, for example with high concentrations of lead, in the context of cultural curing practices [47]. These practices may be distinguished from other physically arduous or painful rituals in the high risk they hold for medical complications, permanent impairment of organ functioning, or death.

Physical Child Neglect

Parental neglect. In many parts of the world, the pervasiveness of poverty necessitates careful consideration before assigning a label of parental neglect. If parents fail to provide a child with a sufficient level of resources compared to other children in that family or other families of similar socioeconomic levels, then parental neglect must be considered. If the family cannot afford proper food or medical care for any of its members, then to deem them neglectful of their children is to doubly victimize them. In many localities the insufficiency is collective, the resources are not generally available, and the situation cannot strictly be considered neglect.

Parental neglect may also occur due to ignorance or parental incapacitation. In some circumstances, parents do not provide their children with necessary and available resources because they lack knowledge about the availability of such resources, or knowledge about the nutritional and medical needs of children. Cultural beliefs about development, foods that children should not eat, or preferred cultural child care or medical practices may compromise the well-being and survival of children. Parental ignorance does not necessarily involve malintent and should not be labeled parental neglect.

Neglect also may occur because parents are incapable of providing proper care due to conditions such as mental retardation or psychological disturbance. This type of neglect undoubtedly occurs in most countries, but it is likely to constitute a larger proportion of the total where neglect due to poverty or parental ignorance has declined.

Institutional neglect. Deprivation or failure to provide children with those resources necessary for their survival and development also can occur in institutions such as schools, child care centers, or orphanages. Child neglect in institutions often is related to the lack of socially and governmentally provided resources for those institutions, and to the lack of social scrutiny of institutions that too frequently house children that others are unwilling to care for.

Discrimination and selective neglect. Certain classes of children suffer neglect as a result of being disvalued and discriminated against [48, 49]. Specifically, girls, handicapped, and higher birth order children (later born children in large families) all under some circumstances face selective neglect by their families. For example, in some societies where food
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is scarce, males and male children eat before females and female children. As a result female children suffer from malnutrition. Handicapped children and later-born children may also be deprived in this way. For another example, under some conditions a sick or handicapped child may be allowed to die because families do not want to spend their meager resources on a child that has less chance of survival. In some societies there will be other special categories of "undervalued" children—illegitimate children, or children with certain personality characteristics who are subject to neglect. Such discrimination can occur not just within families but across a whole society. Thus orphans, homeless children, and children of certain ethnic and racial minorities also will be selectively neglected. This type of neglect is widespread and frequently overlooked. It is hard to know how many child deaths are attributed to it, but it may play a significant role in many child fatalities. Statistics in many countries show differential mortality among females or later-born children that probably reflects this phenomenon of selective neglect more than any other factor [50-54].

Sexual Abuse

Parent-child sexual involvement. This type of abuse was once thought to be extremely rare, but indications now are that in the United States as many as 1 in 20 female children have suffered some form of such abuse with fathers or stepfathers [55]. The damage from the experience, not to mention its direct effects on sexual functioning, appears to stem from the social stigma, the powerlessness of a child in the face of sexual aggression by a parent, and the betrayal of the child at the hands of one of her most crucial caretakers. Children in these situations appear to suffer from rejection and alienation from the whole family. Similar rates of child sexual abuse have been reported in other Western countries [56-63]. The available evidence, though sparse and often anecdotal, indicates that child sexual abuse occurs in a wide range of cultures [21]. Its dynamics appear to thrive on family isolation, male sexual domination, and female sexual shame [64], all conditions which exist in many societies.

Sexual exploitation by other proscribed individuals. In most societies, social norms exist to protect children from sexual exploitation by various other important individuals who have contact with and responsibility for the young child [65, 66]. Sometimes, however, these individuals do abuse their relationship to children for sexual purposes. In the West these situations arise particularly with members of the extended family—uncles, brothers—and with authorities such as teachers and babysitters [20, 64]. Again, this form of child abuse is observed in a wide range of cultures, but its prevalence and distribution remain unknown [21].

Rape. Children are subjected to violent sexual assault by unknown or relatively unknown persons ("strangers") in a variety of situations. This kind of abuse is widely feared by families around the world [67], suggesting that it is widespread, particularly in situations of urbanization, warfare, or other social conflict.

Child prostitution. Child prostitution occurs in many countries in a variety of forms [68, 69]. In some cases children are purchased from parents or relatives for sexual purposes. In other situations, children who have run away from home are lured or forced into prostitution by economic exigency. In Western societies and elsewhere men have traditionally placed a special value on sex with virginal or young children. These attitudes create a market for child prostitution. In addition, child prostitution is fostered by international
travel. Men from Western societies with pedophilic inclinations are able to go to developing countries where, due to economic conditions and inadequate legal constraints, they can obtain access to children in ways they could not in their home countries [70].

Child pornography. This type of sexual abuse has been greatly exacerbated by the technological era. Children are photographed naked or in sexual acts with adults or other children, and these photographs are commercially published or traded [71, 72]. Compared to other forms of sexual abuse, relatively fewer children are involved. Many of those affected, however, may also be involved in prostitution. On the basis of the photographs available to authorities, children of many different nations appear to be subject to this kind of abuse.

Emotional Abuse and Neglect

The five types of psychological maltreatment cited earlier in our definition are distinctions that may be useful when discussing child abuse in an international context [22]. They have not been much discussed or analyzed cross-culturally, with one exception. Rejection has been extensively explored in cross-cultural context by Rohner, who concludes that universal criteria can be applied [4]. Although emotional abuse is usually thought of as being committed by parents and caretakers, there are also forms of institutional emotional abuse [73]. The practice in some settings of incarcerating children together with adults in prisons may be an example of institutional emotional abuse (which carries with it increased risk for physical abuse as well).

This inventory of the major types of child maltreatment is useful for seeing its variety. Unfortunately, it is less useful for seeing its cross-cultural distribution; little reliable information exists on cross-cultural distribution. Documentation of child maltreatment in one society does not necessarily mean that it is absent in neighboring groups. It may simply mean that a professional or an official took an interest in that form of abuse in that region of the world. Similar types of abuse may be equally widespread in other parts of the world and simply not have been written about [21]. Thus, even an inventory of literature on the subject of the different forms of abuse is not necessarily a good index to the distribution of these forms.

CATEGORIES OF CHILDREN AT RISK OF MALTREATMENT

Although current research does not permit conclusive statements about the prevalence or distribution of child abuse, it does suggest categories of children at greater risk of maltreatment. In general, the literature suggests that child maltreatment is less likely in cultures in which children as a class of individuals are highly valued for their economic utility, as bearers of cultural continuity, or as sources of emotional satisfaction [2, 21]. Some cultures appear to value children more highly than others, and even within cultures there is great variation. Nevertheless, even in societies that place a high value on children in general, some children are less valued than others. Some of these categories can be identified through demographic analyses of differential mortality patterns [50-54], while other categories can be identified only with a thorough understanding of the cultural context. These children may be broadly grouped as follows [21]:

1. Health status. Cross-culturally, while the direction of cause and effect is difficult to determine, children whose health status is inferior to that of their siblings or peers are
more likely to be accorded a lesser standard of care. In societies with high infant and child mortality, the stronger child is likely to receive preferential treatment over the weaker. This is in direct contrast to the resources allocated to an ill infant in industrialized societies [74]. Nevertheless, when resources are scarce and child survival tenuous, parents consciously or unconsciously are more likely to invest in those children more likely to survive. For example, Brazilian shantytown mothers identify categories of sickly children whose survival is considered too risky for maternal investment and who thereby receive poor care [49, 75].

Malnourished children also are vulnerable to maltreatment. The quality of maternal care and feeding patterns vary among siblings and only one child in a family may be malnourished [48, 76, 77]. Apathetic, anorexic, and unresponsive behaviors of malnourished children may fail to elicit the parental behaviors and nurturing that would improve their health status and thereby their behavior. Cultural beliefs may further compromise an already malnourished child. In several societies, the behaviors associated with malnutrition may instead be labeled as misbehavior—tantrums due to weaning or jealousy of a new sibling.

2. **Deformed and handicapped children.** Related to health status, the treatment of deformed or handicapped children varies within and between cultures. Deformed or handicapped children may be regarded as supernatural gifts and accorded special status and care. More unusually, deformed or handicapped children are regarded as a burden, an ill-omen, or nonhuman, thus falling outside the usual protections afforded children in general.

3. **Gender.** Cultural beliefs about the proper care of sons versus daughters can compromise health and survival. In Ecuador, for example, mothers follow cultural beliefs that males must be breast fed longer than females [48]. In societies with a strong son preference, for example India, female children are at greater risk for a spectrum of maltreatment. In addition to female infanticide, young girls are less likely to be fed as well as their brothers or to receive the same standard of medical care [51, 78-80].

The cultural context, however, influences the impact of gender on child maltreatment. In Greece, for example, higher cultural expectations of sons translates into harsher punishments for boys who are physically abused more frequently than girls [81].

4. **Children born under unusual, stigmatized, or difficult circumstances.** Circumstances surrounding a child's birth may increase the risk of subsequent maltreatment. In one West African culture, infants who are born face down or with the appearance of teeth or a smile are thought to be witches and subject to deliberate infanticide or sale as slaves to a neighboring group [82].

Multiple births may also place children at risk of maltreatment [83]. In some cultures multiple births may be likened to animal litters.

5. **Excess or unwanted children.** Children who tax family resources may also be subject to maltreatment. Demographic analyses indicate that later born children and children too closely spaced are less likely to survive [52]. Unwanted children whose mothers, for example, have unsuccessfully sought abortions, are also thought to be at increased risk of maltreatment.

6. **Children with disvalued traits and behaviors.** Categories of undervalued children cannot necessarily be identified by evident characteristics, but may vary with cultural values such that ethnographic knowledge is required. The same behavior can be interpreted differently in different cultures. Among the Machiguenga of the Peruvian Amazon, children who display anger are highly disvalued [84]. Yet among the Yanomamo of Venezuela, aggressiveness is highly regarded in young boys who are encouraged to be “fierce” even to the extent of striking their fathers [85].
7. **Diminished social supports.** The cross-cultural record strongly suggests that children with diminished social support networks are vulnerable to maltreatment [2, 21]. In East African societies, children from broken homes or illegitimate unions and intertribal marriages are disproportionately malnourished [17] and neglected [86]. Illegitimate children in one Sepik society could be sold as victims for neighboring groups whose boys were required to commit a homicide to enter manhood [87].

Stepchildren are at increased risk of maltreatment in a number of societies. In the United States and European nations, stepchildren are more vulnerable to physical [88] and sexual abuse [89, 90]. In China, the Marriage Law of 1950 specifically protected stepchildren who, in prerevolutionary China were subject to a range of abuses and whom the Chinese continue to view as vulnerable to maltreatment [2, 91]. Orphans also are at risk of maltreatment unless they become reestablished in a network of individuals concerned for their welfare [83, 92].

8. **Children in situations of rapid socioeconomic change.** Socioeconomic and sociocultural change have been linked in the literature with an increase in child maltreatment [1, 2, 93]. In the change from an agrarian to an urban economy, children become consumers rather than producers and an economic liability rather than an asset [92, 94, 95]. Through formal schooling, immigrant children acquire more knowledge of the new environment and society than their parents possess. They become less obedient and compliant [94], providing greater opportunity for parent-child conflict. Children’s behaviors in urban areas are more aggressive and disruptive [96] while mothers who move to urbanizing areas and come into situations of culture contact are less confident about their efficacy in child rearing [97] and uncertain which of the conflicting models for child care to adopt [98]. These problems are compounded by increased social isolation of families from traditional kin and social networks and thus diminished availability of others for assistance with child care.

Change, however, can also be in a positive direction. Increased availability of medical facilities in India lessened the burden of seeking care for daughters, thereby increasing their chances of survival [79].

Further research is needed concerning the characteristics of children that increase the risk of abuse. Current knowledge, however, is valuable in helping to identify high risk children and circumstances and hopefully to prevent maltreatment. We have a great deal to learn about all the situations that put children at risk for abuse. But the knowledge we currently have is extremely valuable for helping us detect and, in some cases, prevent it. We need to extend our search for more of these indicators of risk in the whole range of contexts where abuse can occur.

**STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES**

**Criteria for Prioritizing among Child Abuse Issues**

The definitions we have offered and the typology we have outlined give a sense of the worldwide dimensions of child abuse not to mention its complexity. Clearly, the task for anyone wishing to confront it is daunting and cannot be undertaken without some prioritization. To try to take on all forms of abuse in all possible countries and regions would be self-defeating. Some decisions are required about where to devote attention, and what issues to highlight. A number of criteria can be offered to help in the establishment of priorities.
1. **Number of children affected.** While the data are obviously limited, nonetheless we can fairly confidently assert that some forms of child abuse affect more children than others. In Western countries, we know that nonfatal physical abuse is more common than child homicide. Worldwide, selective neglect likely affects more children than child prostitution. Unfortunately, we currently have very little data on which to base such comparisons. The figures on comparative prevalence from Western countries are not generalizable worldwide. Most international figures that do exist are speculations and may have been inflated or deflated for political purposes. (Sometimes international organizations make high estimates to draw attention to a problem; in other cases, countries supply low estimates to deprive opponents data for criticism.) Moreover, some types of child abuse, like emotional abuse, may be very difficult to measure under the best of circumstances [22]. Nonetheless, it is important to try to establish some estimates of scope. At that point, it may be apparent that certain forms of child abuse deserve priority attention simply because of their greater prevalence.

2. **Severity of impact.** Some child abuse is more severe, especially that which results in death or permanent impairment. Child homicide, for example, is obviously a high priority by the criteria of severity even if not by the criteria of numbers affected.

3. **Relevance to the international community.** Some types of child abuse seem to occur in virtually all societies, while others are more limited in their occurrence. It may be particularly important for purposes of building true international coalitions to focus on the types of abuse that occur in both developing and developed countries. For example, physical abuse by parents does appear to occur in virtually all urban environments.

4. **Degree of international consensus.** For an international campaign to give priority to types of child abuse around which there is international consensus makes sense. We would find difficulty building a priority at the present moment around spanking, for example, because this is not considered child abuse in most countries.

5. **Applicability of international initiatives.** Some types of child maltreatment may be more amenable to international initiatives. For example, to the degree that child prostitution is fostered by international travel, it may be an appropriate target for an international campaign.

6. **Individualized approaches.** Organizations building awareness about child abuse worldwide may also want to consider the possibility of refraining from establishing any international priorities and encouraging priorities to be set at a local or regional level. Internationally established priorities often have the problem of being irrelevant or unacceptable in individual situations. Locally established priorities have the advantage of being better tailored to an area’s particular problems and resources. Thus, for example, one country may decide that the most important aspect of the child abuse problem for itself is child prostitution. Another may decide that its priority should be the selective neglect of certain groups of children. There may be more motivation to mobilize around priorities that have been locally set.

   One disadvantage to the individualized approach, however, is that it may require more resources and more organization. If countries or regions are going to adopt individualized priorities, they are going to need to acquire information and expertise on the priorities they choose. This means that international organizations will have to serve as clearinghouses for a much broader spectrum of assistances than if the organizations themselves chose the priorities. Another disadvantage concerns the monitoring of action. International organizations will have to monitor those local actions carefully to see that they are serious and implemented. While an individualized approach has its problems, it is a possibility that should be taken seriously.
Proposed Priorities

On the basis of this discussion of priorities, we believe there is justification for a two-pronged approach. First, international organizations should organize a campaign against child abuse internationally that emphasizes what we have called "individualized initiatives." Second, three particular forms of child abuse—parental child battering, selective neglect, and sexual abuse—should be made the focus for concerted international action and attention.

The individualized approach. The first prong of this approach, the idea of many individualized national initiatives, has a great deal to recommend it. Nations differ dramatically in terms of the types of child abuse that are most manifest, the types of child abuse that are most relevant to that nation's public policies, the types of resources that are locally available to combat it, and the amenability of the problem to change. Encouraging nations to develop their own distinctive analyses, focuses, and plans of action is more likely to maximize enthusiasm and motivation about an international campaign against child abuse than externally imposed requirements.

Worldwide approach. At the same time, individualized initiatives are not enough. Child abuse is a problem that is hidden and ignored for important social and cultural reasons in many places. When brought to attention, its existence is widely denied. Action against child abuse often threatens entrenched political, religious, and economic interests. Many nations will be reluctant to focus on important aspects of the child abuse problem unless strongly pushed to do so. This reality suggests that, in addition to encouraging individualized initiatives, international organizations need to adopt a few worldwide priorities in the child abuse area and campaign to get attention to these priorities in all member countries.

The three types of child abuse that should be chosen for the second prong of this two-pronged approach, the types that should be made the focus of a concerted international campaign, are (1) parental child battering, (2) selective neglect, and (3) sexual abuse.

Parental child battering should be a priority for several reasons. It is the "classic" type of child abuse, the type of child abuse that has the largest literature and the most research. Moreover, it occurs in both developing and developed countries. Given the knowledge and literature already existing on this subject and the number of professionals already internationally concerned about it, a large campaign around this priority could be organized quickly and put into action.

Selective neglect should be a priority for other reasons. It focuses on a type of abuse that is implicated in widespread child mortality [48, 49, 51, 54, 75, 78, 79, 99]. Moreover, while difficult to identify on an individual case basis, at least some reliable data from mortality figures can be used for the purposes of estimating the scope and distribution of the problem and evaluating the impact of any intervention. Addressing selective neglect likely would involve an improvement in standards of living for all children.

Sexual abuse should be a priority as well. It is a type of abuse that we believe exists around the world, in both developed and developing countries. It also appears to be a type of abuse which has been relatively unrecognized, and where international action, even at the level of education and awareness, has the potential for effectiveness.

Specific Initiatives

Whatever priorities are ultimately established, certain steps need to be taken to bolster international efforts concerning child maltreatment. What follows are suggestions for some specific types of initiatives that might accompany such a campaign.
Research. To initiate a campaign, an international authority needs to develop the information on which to base and sustain it. A high priority is to develop data about the scope and distribution of types of child abuse. Some such data already exists. For example, inferences about selective neglect can be made from infant mortality data collected by various countries and centrally published by the World Health Organization. In regard to parental child battering, some countries (Sweden, U.S.) have conducted national surveys about its extent. However, the international community needs more reliable and valid data on child abuse.

Many initiatives are possible here. For example, the current World Health Organization (WHO) data do not differentiate between infant deaths due to accidents and those due to inflicted injuries. If WHO could be persuaded to implement the use of such a distinction, it would greatly increase knowledge about child abuse on the international level. More countries also need to be encouraged to conduct child battering surveys. The technology for such surveys exists and international organizations could be vehicles for helping more countries to conduct such research.

Another useful step in the realm of research would be to conduct an international child abuse inventory. A protocol could be developed that would get information from each country on such matters as (1) what types of child abuse are reported to be present there; (2) what estimates, however crude, are available about scope and distribution; (3) which children are vulnerable; and (4) what are the intervention efforts currently in progress.

International awareness building. Concern about child abuse has been slowly diffusing throughout the international community. Generally it has occurred through professionals from one country becoming aware of the efforts of professionals in another. A good example concerns the problem of child sexual abuse. American child welfare professionals began to pay attention to children sexually exploited by their own family members in the mid 1970s as some of these cases came to official attention. Slowly, on the basis of mounting case loads, information was amassed about the dynamics and impact of these situations. U.S. professionals began to give papers about their findings at ISPCAN-sponsored international conferences in 1978, 1981, and 1982, where many European professionals were exposed to the scope of the subject for the first time. The information about the American experience formed the basis for the Europeans to inaugurate in their own countries efforts to detect and treat such cases. By the mid 1980s action regarding intrafamilial child sexual abuse was well established in a number of European countries.

International organizations can become even more of a catalyst to the diffusion of this kind of international awareness about different types of child abuse. The diffusion can take place in a variety of ways: (1) International meetings are one setting where professionals from one country have intensive interaction with professionals from another. A key task is to motivate and provide financial support for professionals from around the world to attend such meetings, especially since many professionals initially believe that child abuse is not very serious in their country. (2) Some diffusion can occur through literature that is published, translated, and aggressively distributed, especially if the literature has the imprimatur of an authoritative agency, for example UNICEF. (3) Diffusion can also occur through bilateral visits and exchanges. Task forces of child abuse experts can visit countries with few child abuse programs to educate about child abuse and build interest in action. By the same token, task forces from various countries can visit others with more child abuse programing to learn about their approaches to the problem.

International organizations should encourage and sponsor more intensive international exchange about child maltreatment. For example, if priorities were given to these subjects, international meetings should be held concerning each of the problems of parental child battering, selective neglect, and sexual abuse. Although the meetings can be coordi-
nated, a whole meeting devoted to a specific priority will allow for the concerted planning that the priority requires. Taking the example of selective neglect, some of the objectives of this meeting should be (1) to bring together international scientific knowledge on the subject; (2) to expose professionals from countries around the world to an awareness of the widespread existence of the practice and the subtle forms it can take; (3) to call attention to successful approaches to eliminating selective neglect; (4) to set some short-term, feasible targets for a campaign to eliminate selective neglect; (5) to produce a document, e.g., conference proceedings or an edited volume, that would convey knowledge about selective neglect to those unable to attend. Similar agendas can be developed for the other priorities.

**International publicity.** One resource that international organizations should take advantage of is the ability to focus international publicity. Certainly the simple adoption of child abuse as a priority by an international organization like UNICEF will have a major impact in the international community, as this priority is publicized. One aspect of this publicity is the ability to focus world attention on particularly egregious local situations.

International publicity has been important in combating child abuse on previous occasions in some areas where local authorities have been slow to act. A good example concerns child pornography in the Netherlands. After several years of international publicity about the fact that the Netherlands was a hub for the making and distribution of child pornography, including resolutions at an ISPCAN congress held in Amsterdam, the Dutch authorities began to take action, and the sale of such pornography is now being curtailed.

**International compacts.** International agreements can be useful catalysts for spotlighting aspects of child abuse and building international cooperation in combatting it. These agreements give form to international consensus; they generate international awareness; they pressure local officials into action; and they can be the basis for cooperation among nations, where such cooperation is important to the accomplishment of the goal. A good example is recent international resolutions creating standards for the distribution and promotion of infant formula. These standards made the world more aware of the problem, and they put pressure on some of the formula-exporting countries to cooperate with efforts in formula-importing countries to regulate the problem.

A form of child abuse that is ready for more international agreements is sexual abuse and child prostitution. We know that one part of the problem is that citizens of affluent countries take advantage of poverty and inadequate regulation to sustain a market for child exploitation in less developed countries. There are aspects of this problem that need to be dealt with in the less developed countries themselves, through better policing, better health care, child welfare work, and the removal of official corruption. However, there are other aspects of the problem that need to be dealt with in the affluent countries through the eradication of "sex tours," the extradition and/or prosecution of the customers, and the creation of bad publicity for those who plan and participate in these activities. Unless there is concerted action on both ends, the demand is likely to continue to stimulate a supply, and vice versa. International agreements are needed to curtail the problem.

**Economic and social change.** We need to recognize that child abuse is intricately tied up with a host of larger economic and social problems that should have priority. However, sometimes this connection becomes an excuse for not attending to the problem itself. For example, because child prostitution is seen as a result of poverty, the solution some propose is simply economic development. However, while economic prosperity may alle-
violate some of the causes of the problem, it is not necessarily the only solution. Even within poverty, child prostitution can be restrained, as the Chinese demonstrated in the 1950s.

Nonetheless, the connection between child abuse and its social and economic context needs attention. Sometimes the best and most effective intervention for child abuse may indeed be to attend to other problems. For example, in a 20-year perspective on a community in India, the establishment of a local clinic was documented to be an important antidote to selective neglect. When parents do not have to expend enormous resources to get help for ill children, the tendency to neglect girls declines [79]. Similarly, the Chinese practice of footbinding, which was very abusive to girls, dissipated when social forces made it an undesirable impediment to a family's well-being [2].

Better studies of these connections need to be done. In some locales the problem of infanticide may respond well to improved contraceptive availability, as families less often have to cope with unwanted children. Female infanticide may also respond well to measures for the social security of the aged, or increased economic participation of women, as parents no longer need to rely on the earning power of male children to secure their future [100]. As these connections are understood, part of the international activity around child abuse prevention may be to give support to those social and economic reforms which seem to be most immediately tied to reductions in the amount of child abuse.

CONCLUSION

Child maltreatment is a worldwide problem. There are millions of cases reported each year in the developed countries that keep records on it and undoubtedly millions more in others where child abuse reporting is not yet institutionalized. It is a problem that cuts across national and cultural boundaries, and it is a problem that in some form evokes universal concern among those charged with the responsibility for the welfare of future generations.

This particular moment is a formative one in the development of international child abuse initiatives, and it calls for both urgency and caution, mobilization and reflection. The urgency and mobilization are required by the large dimensions of the problem and the pain and suffering of those involved. The caution and reflection are required by the complexity of the task, and the variety of considerations that need to be taken into account. Much data and many international points of view need to be gathered and incorporated into our thinking about this problem. New ideas need to be developed and solicited.

Some action is inevitable. It is important that this action reflect the best ideas of the world community, the ideas most likely to succeed in alleviating these threats to children's health, development, and survival.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

11. Child neglect or failure to protect, which are indeed included in our notion of child abuse, are often described as the result of inaction rather than action. However, the notion of action we are using here is broad and includes neglect and failure to protect. When parents neglect a child, it is not that they are doing absolutely nothing; rather, it is that their actions (be they directed toward the child or toward other competing priorities) are not responsive to the child’s needs. Thus neglect is a form of action. Moreover, these actions, when they result in what is termed neglect, generally fulfill the other criteria we have specified here of being proscribed, proximate and preventable.
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Résumé—Les auteurs de cet article fournissent la base d'une stratégie visant à développer une approche internationale du développement de la violence à l'égard d'enfants. Tout d'abord la maltraitance à l'égard d'enfants est définie d'une façon qui la rend applicable à travers les différentes cultures et frontières nationales. Il s'agit de cette partie de mauvais traitements à l'égard d'enfant qui résultent d'une action humaine qui est réprouvée, qui se produit dans l'environnement immédiat et qui peut être prévenue. Un certain nombre d'autres dimensions telles que le degré de la sanction sociale ou de la censure sociale sont définies dans un sens tel qu'ils augmentent la probabilité qu'une action malaisante ou une action nuisible soit considérée comme des mauvais traitements à l'égard d'enfants. La recherche transculturelle révèle également qu'il existe certaines catégories d'enfants à risque tels que ceux qui sont en mauvaise santé, ceux qui sont des enfants non désirés ou nés dans des circonstances adverses ou avec des caractéristiques qui sont considérées comme ayant peu de valeur ou encore ceux qui se trouvent pris dans des changements socioéconomiques rapides. Ces derniers sont plus vulnérables aux mauvais traitements où qu'ils se trouvent. L'article se termine sous forme d'un plaidoyer pour une stratégie internationale à deux pointes. D'un côté cette stratégie encourage les différents pays à mettre l'accent sur le type particulier de maltraitance qui requiert le plus d'attention dans la société en cause et d'autre part insiste sur la nécessité pour les pays de participer en même temps à une action internationale concertée s'adressant à trois formes de mauvais traitements à l'égard d'enfants: (1) les services infligés par les parents; (2) la négligence sélective; et enfin (3) la violence sexuelle.
Resumen—El abuso del niño es definido trans-culturalmente como “esa porción del daño a los niños que es la consecuencia de la acción humana que es proscrita, próxima y prevenible.” Otras dimensiones que ayudan a definir el daño al niño como abusivo son: (1) la intencionalidad de los actos; (2) la desaprobación social (local) de los actos; (3) existe consenso internacional acerca del carácter abusivo de los actos; (4) los actos son perpetrados por individuos; (5) el daño es sufrido exclusivamente por los menores de edad; (6) los actos son cometidos contra menores de edad que han sido asignados la calidad de personas por la comunidad. La investigación trans-cultural revela que ciertas categorías de niños—por ejemplo los de salud pobre, hembras, niños no deseados y aquellos nacidos en circunstancias difíciles o con características desapreciadas, o bajo condiciones de rápido cambio socio-económico, son más vulnerables al maltrato en muchos países. Una estrategia internacional dual es propuesta que, primeramente, urge a los países individuales de darle prioridad a los tipos particulares de abuso que necesitan atención urgente en sus sociedades y al mismo tiempo los estimula a participar en un esfuerzo internacional para combatir tres formas diseminadas de abuso del niño: el asalto físico del niño por los padres, la negligencia selectiva (la negligencia de ciertas categorías de niños) y el abuso sexual.