

'Ambiguous play': Understanding the right to play – a case study of street-connected children in Kathmandu

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Govind Subedi

Tribhuvan University (TU), Nepal

Sally Atkinson-Sheppard 

University of Westminster, UK

Vinay Jha

Mid-West University, Nepal

Abstract

The article considers street-connected children and their right to play. By drawing on a qualitative case study involving interviews and focus groups with NGO workers and children who lived on the streets in the Kathmandu valley, this article explores play, its role in children's lives and the applicability of the UNCRC Article 31. We argue that play forms an important part of street-connected children's lives, helping them to develop friendships and solidarity. However, in some instances play becomes ambiguous, associated with risk and crime. We propose the notion of 'ambiguous play' to explore this further. For these children, play is closely related to survival, to earning an income and engagement in crime, which can, at times, be considered a form of enjoyment or fun. This takes discussions into ambiguous areas, in stark contrast to normative notions of play associated with childhood innocence, deeply embedded within wider ideals of childhoods, rooted in coloniality. We reflect on this in light of ethical and moral dilemmas related to ambiguous play as well as implications for research, policy and practice.

Keywords

children's rights, Nepal, play, street-connected children

Introduction

Play is a significant part of childhood (Du Plessis, 2014). It is also an enjoyable, creative endeavour (Du Plessis, 2014) and a vehicle for learning, socialisation and development (Pramling et al.,

Corresponding author:

Sally Atkinson-Sheppard, University of Westminster, Wells Street, London, W1B 2HW, UK.

Email: s.atkinsonsheppard@westminster.ac.uk

2006). Play relates to culture, expression and well-being (United Nations, 2000). However, defining play is difficult largely because play and childhood are socially constructed (Aries, 1962; Kaneva and Corcoran, 2021). For many children around the world opportunities for play are restricted, or hindered by issues including urbanisation and violence, over-crowded living conditions and homelessness (Kaneva and Corcoran, 2021).

Article 31 of The United National Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states:

States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

Numerous scholars discuss children's right to play. For example, Lott (2023) considers play to be an economic, social and cultural right. Other research has explored children's right to play in India, reflecting on the constraints of urbanisation, overcrowded living conditions and unsafe streets (Oke et al., 1999), or gender differences regarding the nature of play in Africa (Mayeza, 2017). Despite this, the right to play has largely been considered a 'forgotten right' (Lott, 2021), there are very few studies about the right to play in Nepal, the location of our study (Pradhan et al., 2015).

In 1990, Nepal ratified the UNCRC and the Act Relating to Children 2018 has, to some extent, been crafted in line with the UNCRC guaranteeing to children the right to play and recreation. The Act states that, 'every child has right to recreation, and participation in sports according to their age and interests'. To support this, the National Sports Council in Nepal has provided both indoor and outdoor sports via schools to many children. However, there are some children, particularly those who are the focus of this article – street-connected children, who are deprived of these rights because they are neither in schools nor are they, in most cases, supported by families or wider communities.

In South Asia, the numbers of children who are homeless and live on the streets are expansive, particularly in urban areas, towns and metropolitan centres. In Delhi alone, more than 60,000 children live on the streets (Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation, 2021). These children live at traffic junctions and flyovers, religious places, large markets, railway stations and bus stands, landfill and waste processing locations and rag-picking sites. They often engage in begging, work as labourers, rag-pickers and are at risk of substance abuse. In Nepal, an estimated 5000 children live on the streets, mainly in Kathmandu valley and other urban areas (Pradhan et al., 2015).

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) classifies street-connected children into three categories: 'on'-the streets, 'off' the streets and children 'of' the streets (cited in Basnet, 2010). The former are children who live, sleep and work on the streets while children 'off' the streets refers to children who earn their living in the street through begging, rag-picking or involvement in illicit activities but return to their home at night. The term children 'of' the streets relates to those young people who have some connections with the streets and who are 'street-affiliated' (Thomas de Benitez, 2011). These definitions reflect the complexity of these children's lives. In line with global scholarship, we utilise terms such as 'children with street connections' or 'street-connected children' which offer a more nuanced way to describe children who are street-involved (Thomas de Benitez, 2011), moving away from negative and often stereotypical connotations of children who live their lives on the streets (Corcoran et al., 2020).

It is estimated that in Nepal, 60% of young people living on the streets are on-the-street children, and 40% are off-the-street children or 'street-affiliated' (Basnet, 2010). However, as with all

studies into street children it is difficult to ascertain accurate numbers due to the varying nature of street children's lives and lack of effective systems in which to record and count their details (Basnet, 2010). The Government of Nepal has initiated efforts to support street-connected children in Kathmandu. The Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare issued a specific policy: the 'Directives for the Protection and Management of Street Children, 2015', currently being implemented. Accordingly, the Ministry and National Child Rights Council in coordination with the police, the National Centre for Children at Risk, and some NGOs have been carrying out a campaign to support street-connected children with a slogan of: 'Children don't need to stay and they should not stay on the street' (Central Child Welfare Board, 2017). Between 2016 and 2019, a total of 1011 children were rescued (a term used in Nepal to describe the process of identifying children and supporting them to leave the streets, with the help of government-led personnel and referrals to drop-in centres or NGOs) from the streets of Kathmandu valley, the majority of whom were boys (89%) and rest girls (11%). Nearly 90% of these street-connected children were migrant children, often from rural villages. Between 10% and 15% of the children rescued were reported to return to the streets following their rescue.

Research related to street-connected children in Nepal, mainly focuses on how children experience life on the streets and their coping mechanisms (Basnet, 2010). This aligns with wider scholarship that considers the social construction of childhood (Aries, 1962) and the varying ways in which young people experience childhood, including in Nepal (Poudel and Choi, 2022). Pradhan et al. (2015) argue that street-connected children are at risk of violence, sexual abuse, drug addiction, threats from gangs, social exclusion, exposure to crime, alcoholism and starvation. Street-connected children in the Kathmandu valley are increasingly exposed to drugs including intravenous drugs, sharing of needles and unsafe sexual behaviours. Sharma (2020) examined the health status of street-connected children drawing on the sample of 150 young people in two metropolitan cities (Kathmandu and Birgunja) and found that 41% of the children interviewed were suffering from different diseases and alcohol consumption was the key risk factor of poor health among these young people.

A number of studies reveal that street-connected children often face sexual abuse and exploitation and unnecessarily police arrest and torture. Subedi (2002) carried out a study with 100 children in Kathmandu valley and found widespread child sexual exploitation. A recent study by The Freedom Fund (2021) claimed that nearly 9 out of 10 street children interviewed reported that they were offered money or food, drinks, clothing etc. or both in exchange of sexual activities and an estimated 2000 to 3000 street children, especially girls, were forced into commercial sexual exploitation in the Kathmandu valley. Another study by KC et al. (2001) conducted among 108 rag-pickers (children who live on the streets and collect rubbish to sell) in Kathmandu revealed that one of the key threats in the rag-pickers' lifestyle is police arrest, often on a 'police whim' rather than on evidence of involvement in crime. Nearly two-fifths of rag-pickers were arrested on charges of stealing, 28% of being on the streets too early in the morning or too late at night, 6.5% due to fighting, 18.5% without any reasons and 3% were charged with drug trafficking (KC et al., 2001).

These pioneering studies support an understanding the lives of street-connected children in South Asia. They also highlight the importance of ensuring children's rights. Since the inception of the UNCRC in 1989, children's rights have formed an important and significant component of research and practice with children. The need to consider children's rights as interdependent highlights the importance of viewing the UNCRC as a 'whole' and for children's rights to be considered as part of a holistic approach to children's economic, social and cultural development (Lott, 2023).

However, for many children in Nepal there is still a great deal to be done to realise their rights, particularly children's right to protection from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect (UNICEF,

2023). There are also lacunas in understanding the social construction of childhood in this context and how play relates to young people's enjoyment and development (UNICEF, 2023). In addition, research and practice which focuses on children's rights misses an important aspect of children's physical growth and cognitive development that is, examining the status of right to play (Lott, 2023). In many instances the right to play is a 'forgotten right', yet one which is inextricably linked to the holistic development of children (Lott, 2023). To date there is no study which considers the right to play in Nepal, particularly from the perspective of street-connected children. Thus, we consider the following questions: How do these children understand their right to play, rest, leisure and recreational activities? What are the constraints in realising these rights while living in the street? What do street-connected children play? How do they play and with whom? In doing so, we address a lacuna in knowledge related specifically to children's right to play in Nepal.

Methodology

The field work was conducted in Kathmandu valley, Nepal from January–March 2023. There were two phases of data collection. The first phase consisted of a survey and semi-structured interviews with 11 adult practitioners. The practitioners included Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)¹ personnel, police officers and government officials including personnel from the National Child Rights Council, the Government's highest entity on children's rights in the country. The NGO personnel work directly with street-connected children as programme managers, psychosocial counsellors, hostel wardens or social workers. The participants were specifically chosen for inclusion in this study. The NGOs are the leading organisations working with street-connected children in Nepal. The lead author of this article is Nepalese and has engaged in various research/evaluation work alongside some of the above-mentioned NGOs including the National Human Rights Commission of Nepal for the last 20 years. Another co-author is an ex-police officer engaged in community policing and child protection in Nepal, also for over 20 years. The reputations of the authors facilitated rapport with these NGOs and the relevant wider Government entities and supported gaining access to collect the data discussed in the article.

The questions focused on the main themes of our research that is, conceptualisations of play, accessibility of play, rest and leisure, how and what street-connected children play, which was disseminated via email among the participants. Written consent was gained for each participant. The research participants were asked to provide written responses to nine questions (in their own language of choice, either English or Nepali). The researchers read the responses and verified each of the responses through visiting the participants at their place of work or calling them via telephone. In this way, the research team were able to gather an initial understanding of the participant's views, via the survey and then develop the data by conducting more focused and in-depth interviews.

Phase two of the research consisted of 8 focus group discussions conducted with 45 participants who had lived on the streets as children (9 females and 36 males, aged 15–30 years old). There were broadly two categories of participants': first, those young people who had spent the whole or part of their childhood on the streets and now live at NGOs that provide them with housing and support (in this category, some of the participants were under 18 and some were over 18). The second category included adults who lived on the streets as children and remain 'street-affiliated' as adults, working as rag-pickers, public toilet cleaners or begging. These participants are homeless and usually sleep on the streets at night, under bridges, in public houses, temples or monasteries.

The participants were located with the help of NGOs including CPCS, VOC, CWIN-Nepal, *Sathai Saath* and SOBER Recovery, all of whom were happy to include their details within this

article. Focus group discussions were conducted at the NGOs but in separate rooms, only the researchers and participants were present. The consent form and information sheet were developed based on the Ethical Guidelines of University of Westminster in English language and then it was translated into Nepali. The information sheet was read aloud to all potential participants by staff at the NGOs and those interested in participating in the research were provided with the information sheet and a consent form. The research team and NGO staff were available to answer any questions or address any concerns. The consent form was given to each participant before the commencement of the data collection, this was read-aloud to each participant who were also given the time to read the document. All participants were literate (to varying degrees) and thus written consent was obtained before conducting the focus group discussions.

Each focus group discussion lasted from 2 to 2:30 hours. The researchers developed a series of questions to guide the discussions, these questions focused on the main themes of the research, conceptualisation of play, rest and leisure and the types of games/play children when they lived on the streets. The length of time reflected the in-depth discussions held with the young people. We put no specific timeframe on the focus group discussions but rather allowed the discussions to reflect the research themes and the engagement of our participants. The discussions were engaging, lengthy and productive. The participants were not paid for their involvement in the study, but we did provide hot drinks and snacks during the focus group discussions. All focus group discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed. The research included a 'research sensitivity protocol'. This protocol underpinned the research. It included ensuring that participants were informed of the research and its outcomes, observing participants for signs of distress, discussing at the start of each focus group discussion that participants could stop the focus group discussion at any time and without giving a reason, that participants were free to leave the focus group discussion at any time etc. The research team have an established rapport with the NGOs involved in this study, this supported the engagement of the participants. The NGO personnel aided the facilitation of the focus group discussions by arranging groups comprising of young people who usually spend time together while at the NGOs, this ensured that participants felt comfortable to engage with one another and this also assisted confidentiality as many of the experiences discussed in the focus group discussions were already known to each of the participants due to their prior knowledge of each other's lives. To further support confidentiality and anonymity, a no name policy was utilised, participants were asked not to use their names or the names of their associates. The research team also agreed to inform the NGOs should any participant show signs of distress or if they were concerned about an issue discussed with the focus group discussions, this ensured that further support was available to the participants, should they require it.

The responses for the survey and interview questions were analysed utilising descriptive and then thematic analysis. This data was analysed as an individual 'data set'. Data from the focus group discussions were compiled via field notes and audio-recordings. The audio-recording was taken as the master data. The recordings were transcribed and verified from the field notes taken by one of the researchers. The final transcribed data was translated into English. Our data analysis began on the day of each interview or focus group discussion, the research team wrote-down the field notes and listened to the audio-recordings on a daily basis so that any gaps in responses could be incorporated into the following days data collection. The data from the focus group discussions was analysed individually, considering the research themes via descriptive and then thematic analysis. This data was then triangulated with the data obtained via the practitioner interviews, highlighting the convergences and divergences between the data sets, leading to the research findings discussed below.

Findings and discussion

Conceptualisations and accessibility of play

The lack of information related to the right to play, particularly for street-connected children led us to explore how those children who are street affiliated understand the concept of play and the related components of rest, leisure and engagement in cultural and artistic activities, included in Article 31 of the UNCRC. The data illustrated that play forms an important part of life on the streets. However, the types of play that street-connected children engage in is often risky and limited. This highlights the socially constructed nature of play and forms an important contextual factor to street-connected children's lives. Play is a vehicle for socialisation and solidarity but also something which is marginalised and secondary to primary needs of survival and management of risk on the streets.

Street-connected children's lives are complex and multi-faceted; imperatively most have to work to ensure their survival (Tyler et al., 1987), all of which impact upon conceptualisation and accessibility of play. As Schwartzman (1977) argues, a clear distinction between work and play is not necessarily evident for many of the world's children, illustrated by our data in Nepal. An NGO worker explained 'street children spend their daily life begging, rag-picking and they are incredibly stressed about how to collect food and earn money for their survival, this means they have limited opportunities to engage in extra activities'. Other NGO workers agreed: 'they are engaged in some of the worst form of child labour, they don't know about their right to play, they don't get the opportunity to enjoy such rights' and 'in reality, children only think about play in their spare time, more often they think about how to get food, and how to get money to buy drugs, alcohol or to give to the leaders of their groups. They have to think about place to spend the night and make a plan of how to survive at night'. Thus, in alliance with Tyler et al. (1987), play is closely related to survival and mitigating risk. In many instances, play is entwined with other activities, as an NGO worker explained:

Whenever, I see street children they are two things at the same time. First, they are playing with their friends and secondly, they are engaged in other tasks such as begging, selling, asking for food. Their play does not have any specific rules. Most of the time they play a touching game (*chue-dum* in Nepali) or they are just running and snatching something that belongs to them and passing it to each other. Generally, there are 3 to 6 children are playing together.

This was reiterated by one of the young people we spoke to, Aatish, aged 16 who explained 'during the day I collect plastic bottles, iron rods, other things from garbage sites in Balkhu to sell for money. While looking for these things, I also enjoy swimming in the Bagmati River. There's water in the river in the summer'. Thus, it is imperative to consider survival, work and play as interlinked and part of a wider solidarity strategy of street-connected children in Nepal.

The participants explained how street-connected children are aware of wider notions of play, they witness children playing in schools or public compounds, but their access to these places is largely denied, rather, they play on roadsides, on rubbish dumps and in slums. Aabesh, now 25 explained further:

I lived on the street throughout my childhood. I was about nine or ten when I came to Kalimati. I live under the Bridge of Bisnumati River with two friends. We collect garbage from the Kalimati vegetable and fruit wholesale shops. When we were kids, we knew places to play, there was a playground close to us, but it was for those who go to school, we couldn't play there.

The streets where children live and work are busy and crowded, as one of the young people illustrated ‘street children often play in dirty, unhygienic places, using mud and stones’ (Pabin, aged 17). In addition, there is not necessarily a distinction between day and night, street-connected children work throughout the day and there is no guarantee where they will sleep. An NGO worker explained further: ‘The streets are a busy and occupied place. When a child lives on the streets during the day, they keep themselves busy with various tasks. And at night they have to find shelter on the streets’. This uncertainty was discussed by another participant: ‘It is difficult for street-based children to find time to play games. On top of this, they live in unsafe and risky places. They don’t necessarily have a routine during the day. They have little idea of where they will spend the night and they’re not sure about their food either’. In addition, the data demonstrated how street-connected children are perceived and treated by people passing by, an NGO worker explained how they will often experience negative comments, offensive behaviour, aggression and assaults. Street-connected children may also face recruitment into criminal gangs and enticement to engage in ‘illicit activities by pimps and others’ (also discussed in Atkinson-Sheppard’s, 2019 study of street-connected children in Bangladesh) illustrating the vulnerabilities of their lives on the streets.

Street-connected children rarely have parental or adult supervision, nor do they have access to resources associated with play: books, games, toys etc. Thus, ‘normative’ assumptions of play, reinforced by the UNCRC is largely unattainable to children who live their lives on the streets. The wider components of Article 31, that children should have access to rest, leisure and cultural activities are also unattainable to street-connected children. The research demonstrated how street-connected children rarely have safe places to rest, they are often awake at night, struggle to sleep due to varying weather conditions, hot summers and the monsoon season, and their opportunities for leisure and engagement in cultural activities is severely hampered by the constraints of their lives.

In this context, street-connected children have ‘little idea about their rights, they live freely on the streets without boundaries’ (NGO worker). However, the research also demonstrated the positive impact of NGOs on street-connected children’s lives, providing them with housing, food, safety and access to education. In this context, an understanding of their rights becomes more attainable for street-connected children, and they have greater access to rest, leisure and play. Nadin, aged 15, lives at one of the NGOs we visited, he described some of the games he plays at the centre: ‘We play many kinds of games here. For example, football, cricket, badminton, ludo, quizzes and others’. The nature of play is thus socially constructed and specific to the needs and experiences of street-connected children. In acknowledging this we can challenge dominant discourse which, to date has largely marginalised the experiences of children like the ones in this study and for whom the streets are a home, and access to play is challenging and nuanced, reflecting the complexities of these children’s lives.

The role and nature of play

The research demonstrated the importance of play and the nature of play. Extant research suggests that playing together helps street-connected children to develop bonds and friendships, particularly important for surviving on the streets (Ennew and Swart-Kruger, 2003; Scanlon et al., 1993). This was evident in our research, and there was a consensus among the participants that play helps street-connected children ‘cope with life on the street. Games are also the means of stress management. While they play, they also make friends’ (NGO worker).

Our participants explained that children rarely have access to resources associated with play that is, games, books, toys etc. However, the street children described the games they do play that is, ‘we create our own games like making footballs from old socks or old cloths’ (Nabraj, aged 16).

Bablu, aged 14 explained: 'I always walk around with friends in the street. We go fishing and swimming in the river and enjoy it'. Nadin, aged 15 described a number of games: 'We play Guchcha, Khoppi and also go swimming in the river. I have street friends to play with. We play games like Chor-Police (thief-police). You have three or four friends who pretend to be police officers and other friends pretend to be the thieves'.

In many instances, the data demonstrated great innovation in the ways in which children develop their own resources, also seen within studies into play in neighbouring India (Oke et al., 1999). Our research illustrated gender differences in types of games played by street-connected children. For example, one of the participants explained that 'traditional play like *Dandi-biyo*, *Kabarddi*, *Guchchha*, *Carrom-poor* are outdoor games and are mostly played by boys, while *Dori-Naghane* (jump rope), *Gatti* (making dolls), *Chungi*, *Luki-dom* are outdoor games mainly played by girls'. One of the NGO workers described how street-connected children 'don't have proper games and toys mostly they play cards, marbles and coins. They sometimes play online games if they have money'. Another NGO worker explained how: 'They play either locally or go to the open spaces on the outskirts of the city. Sometimes they swim in rivers, play football, online games, chess, snakes and ladders, ludo. They invent games or bring indigenous games too, like running and meeting with other children in similar situations'.

Existing discourse suggests that children play in a variety of ways, but often with resources including books, toys and games (Dag et al., 2021). These resources are largely unavailable to street-connected children. However, the participants described the ways in which street-connected children improvise, using resources that are available, playing alongside other children in similar situations, using their imaginations and with games that cost little money or that can be found or given to them on the streets. The data demonstrates the purpose of play for street-connected children: a means to build social relations and develop solidarity among their peers. Our research also explores the nature of play for street-connected children, for whom resources are limited but where innovation is used to overcome this adversity.

Ambiguous play

The introduction of the UNCRC in 1990 signified an important step in considering children's rights, including Article 31 discussed here. However, alongside this 'rights discourse' another debate developed, a focus on young people's agency. The relationship between the UNCRC and the development of what is known as the 'new studies of childhood' considered the importance of understanding children and young people as 'social actors' engaged in developing their own lives and asserting agency over their decision making (Honwana and De Boeck, 2005). This led to encouraging children and young people to be 'active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' (James and Prout, 1990: 8). This move away from paternalism and towards greater inclusion and participation was widely celebrated among academics, policy makers and young people, signifying an important shift in the way that children and childhoods are understood and conceptualised (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012).

The general consensus among this debate was that agency is 'good' and that children should be encouraged to play an active role in shaping their own lives (Ensor and Gozdzik, 2010). However, more critical scholarship has questioned the nature of agency, including how young people exert agency, particularly amid constricted and challenging circumstances (Durham, 2008). Research with child soldiers points to the notion of 'ambiguous agency' (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). As Bordonaro and Payne (2012: 366) argue, debate becomes increasingly challenging when young people exert agency in situations of war or conflict and when in doing so, they engage in acts of violence or where the 'agency amongst children and youth is in stark contrast to established and

normative conceptions about childhood and moral and social ideals about the kind of behaviour young people should demonstrate. When children engage in war their agency becomes ambiguous'. Agency, which is normally celebrated and encouraged, becomes something more complicated, muddled with moral and ethical quandaries about what behaviour is 'right' for children and young people today (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017). The idea of what children 'should' and 'should not' do is associated with wider ideals of childhoods which are deeply rooted within assumptions, largely derived from the global North highlighting issues of coloniality and questioning the very notion of what childhood and children mean in contexts outside of the metropole (Liebel, 2020).

The concept of 'ambiguous agency' (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012) proved to be an important one for the current study. We combine the notion of ambiguous agency with street-connected children's right to play and propose the idea of 'ambiguous play'. There are parallels with the child soldier debate and wider discourse related to street-connected children's involvement in organised crime (see Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019 for more details). As with Bordonaro and Payne's (2012) proposition, in this context, street-connected children engage in play which is outside of the 'normative' assumptions of what play 'should' and 'should not be'. The data from the NGO workers but also the street-connected children help us to challenge this dominant discourse and demonstrates types of play which are inextricably linked to survival, but which is also ambiguous and associated with risk, exploitation and crime. Understanding 'ambiguous play' is important in this context.

The types of play that street-connected children engage in is wide-ranging and has a variety of different functions. However, in some instances the play goes beyond a particular game and into more ominous activities. The focus groups with the ex-street-connected children demonstrated that play often involves earning money. For example, Laksh, aged 17, explained how street-connected children engage in Nepalese traditional 'adult male' games including *Dandi-Biyo* and *Khoppi* (gambling). Other participants discussed similar activities, particularly gambling and playing cards. Sabal, aged 18, explained: 'Taking of dendrite glue and alcohol is common, and so is smoking too. We used to be intoxicated by taking of *goti* (tablets), fighting each other, playing cards, marbles and then needing money, to get the money we would go and rob people's houses'. The game 'PUBG' was specifically discussed in relation to crime because street-connected children require money to play such games and to acquire money, some commit theft, burglary or theft. According to an NGO worker, some street-connected children find enjoyment in engagement in petty crime, a theme also identified in a similar study which considered children's right to play in Bangladesh (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., forthcoming). This relates to wider criminological literature which considers crime as enjoyment or fun and linked to wider youth subcultures (i.e. Cohen, 1955). Other participants discussed taking drugs and alcohol for enjoyment and to escape the realities of their lives. In addition, participants explained how they enjoyed being alone in the streets, after taking drugs or alcohol as Bapik, aged 15, described: 'walking and dancing in the streets'. The research also explored other areas, the collective behaviour of street-connected children and the association of this with risk and guilt: 'They're not afraid and don't feel guilt for their activities. There is competition within their groups which means they are willing to engage in more risky work, this can lead to more serious forms of crime' (NGO worker). Thus, in alliance with wider criminological literature which explores group behaviour, peer groups and gangs (Cohen, 1955). There were other issues, for example an NGO worker expressed their concerns in relation to under-age sex and a lack of information related to contraception: 'Street girls and boys also play games "in a romance mode," they have sex and girls have become pregnant unintentionally'. Ambiguous play is complex and varied and is thus in alliance with Sutton-Smith's (1997) discussions of the ambiguity of play in regard to the difficulties in defining play and the ways in which play is

multifarious and nuanced. However, in this context, ambiguous play also considers and reflects the vulnerabilities that street-connected children face, and the realities of lives lived on the streets.

Normative and largely global North assumptions usually associate children's play with adults, whether that be in the form of access to play or resources provided by parents or schools or in the form of 'adult-led' play in the home, community or learning provision (Child Development Institute, 2023). This is closely aligned with understandings of children rooted within coloniality, and which reflect only certain types of childhoods, largely those within the global North (Liebel, 2020). Within these notions and associated discourse, the role of the adult in children's access to play is largely considered a positive one, an 'enabler' and a 'protector'. It is important to challenge this dominant discourse which is not necessarily reflective of children's lives. Street-connected children, for the most part, live without parental or adult supervision (Thomas de Benitez, 2011). As discussed, access to play is limited and when they do play, they play on the streets and with other children in similar situations. The role of the adults in these children's lives is ambiguous, in many instances these adults are not enablers of play but rather pose risks to children, in the form of exploitation, abuse or recruitment into criminality (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019). Our research demonstrated how, in some instances, adults enable forms of play, but this play is often criminal or associated with substance use/abuse. This highlights and reinforces the idea of ambiguous play and the uncertainty of the adults that surround, posing questions about the role of adults in street-connected children's play. It also supports the proposition that it is important to challenge hegemonic perspectives that develop and reinforce a singular notion of childhood and play, in order to better reflect street-connected children's lives.

Implications for future research, policy and practice

In many ways the research poses more questions than it answers. There are wider questions posed about the role of play, particularly for street-connected children. Where do we stand when play is, like discussed in this article, ambiguous, multifaceted but often related to risk – and crime. Where does play finish and crime begin? Does a street child's involvement in risky play, with potential victims make them less of a criminal because of their marginalised status, how might we approach this issue, how might we better conceptualise the lives that street-connected children lead and the role of play in their plight for survival? What is the role of the adult in this ambiguous landscape?

There were also dichotomies, the research illustrated ambiguous play, often associated with play on the streets. However, the NGO workers also discussed play that occurs within support centres which in some cases, provide care and assistance for street-connected children. When this occurs street-connected children are given opportunities to play, they are provided with resources, books, games and safe spaces in which to explore their creativity and expression. In these instances, NGO and their workers become the 'enablers and protectors' of play, discussed earlier in relation to the role of adults and play. However, it is important to note that there is some conflict here, with NGO workers conceptualisations of a 'type' of play, likely reinforcing dominant narratives discussed earlier and silencing the realities of street-connected children's lives. This also relates to the wider more aspirational goals of the UNCRC and engagement in cultural and artistic activities, as an NGO worker explained: 'Street connected children are part of the nation, but nobody thinks about them. They face many problems on the streets and have no rights. But when they arrive at the organisation, they have a great platform to engage in the cultural and artistic life'. The research highlights the importance of NGOs and similar services for street-connected children and the positive impact they can have on young people's lives, supporting street-connected children to realise their rights, including the right to play. The young people we spoke to explained how NGOs

develop a daily schedule for those living there. This relates to ‘a waking up time, maintaining personal hygiene, cleaning, praying, eating breakfast, playing games, reading, painting, singing and dancing’ (Hari, aged 16). However, some of the participants complained that they were not free to play the games on their choice largely because of having inadequate toys and things to play vis-à-vis the number of children at the NGOs. Despite this, Jagdish, aged 16, described how he had learned to play indoor games including ‘badminton and basketball, I never dreamt that I could play these games when I lived on the streets’. Elshika, now 21, recalled his time living on the streets and explained how ‘when you are on the streets, and when you take drugs, you become wild and there is no thought or question of play or entertainment’. Madan, aged 16, explained that ‘while there are no toys and things to play when you are in the street, you still find things to do, walking around with others, roll tyres from bicycles or things like that. But in the care home you are in a normal state, not taking drugs, so it feels like you have the time to play and the toys and games to play with’.

These discussions highlight the importance and distinction between play on the streets and play associated with NGOs. The latter forms part of a wider discourse which relates to conceptualisations of play – a ‘normative’ understanding. But is one understanding of play ‘better’ than another? Is it okay to assume and integrate normative assumptions of play just because this is the way that play has been largely conceptualised? Is this not more of a reflection of wider notions of coloniality than any real understanding of the competitiveness of street-connected children’s lives?

These questions require further consideration and a reflection on the ways in which street-connected children’s views and experiences have been historically marginalised in this debate. By exploring the realities of these children’s lives, we are better informed of the conceptualisation of play – which should be valued and celebrated, moving away from further marginalisation and judgement, deeply rooted in colonial ideals, largely unreflective of street-connected children’s lives today.

The study considered the applicability of the UNCRC, Article 31 in light of street-connected children in Nepal. As the previous discussion have highlighted, Article 31 is not reflective of children who live their lives on the streets, these children are often deprived of their right to play, as an NGO worker explained further:

Street children’s lives are not easy. Street life is the most challenging labour. To think about the right to play, to think about leisure is difficult in a context where children are excluded from access to basic needs and struggle to survive. The streets are unsafe places to live. Street children spend their lives on the streets where thousands of people cross the road, there is heavy traffic, it’s a risky environment for them. They rarely get the opportunity to rest, access leisure time and play, especially compared to children in the community.

Another NGO worker concurred:

Street connected children have their own way of life. There is inadequate guardianship and mentoring but they create their own protection systems by making someone their leader. They play and take leisure time in their own way, but they face great risks.

Risk, survival and the need to earn money to survive are closely interwoven for street-connected children (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., forthcoming). Furthermore, in ratifying the UNCRC, Nepal agreed to facilitate the right to play for all children, yet as these discussions have highlighted, for street-connected children play is often unattainable and embedded within risk. The research demonstrates the importance of the Nepalese state in ensuring children’s rights including the right to play and specifically for some of its most marginalised young people.

There are various recommendations for future research, this includes the need to consider, in greater depth, the role of play for street-connected children, the notion of ambiguous play and what this means on a moral and ethical levels but also on more practical levels too. The role of the adult and the interaction between adults and street-connected children also requires greater consideration. As we have discussed, adults often play an important but ambiguous role in street-connected children's lives, blurring the boundaries between enabler, protector, exploiter and abuser. The wider discussions of the applicability of the UNCRC and Article 31 points to the need to better engage with this framework, to ensure that the UNCRC and associated guidance is amended and developed to better reflect the realities of street-connected children's lives.

Conclusion

There is a lack of knowledge related to the relationship between street-connected children and play, particularly in Nepal. To address this lacuna, we considered data derived from NGO workers, police officers, government officials and street-connected children to consider street-connected children's right to play in the Kathmandu valley. Our research found that street-connected children are often deprived of their right to play and associated notions of rest and leisure. Despite this, play forms an important part of street-connected children's lives, particularly from the perspective of friendship, solidarity and support. Children on the streets face untold risks, and struggle to survive. In some cases, play becomes ambiguous, embedded within risk and associated with crime. We propose the notion of 'ambiguous play' to explore this further. In this context, play is closely related to survival, to earning an income and, at times, engagement in crime, which in itself is considered a form of enjoyment of fun. This takes discussions into ambiguous areas, in stark contrast to where normative notions of play associated with childhood innocence and deeply embedded within wider ideals of childhoods which are rooted in coloniality (Liebel, 2020). In initiating these discussions, we hope to develop a better understanding of the multi-faceted nature of play, play as a socially constructed and nuanced phenomena, which is has specific and important connotations for street-connected children and which is deeply embedded within the social construction of childhood. Existing scholarship, largely arising from the Global North lacks crucial engagement with street connected children as discussed in our study. Children for whom play is imperative and complex and which, in many instances, supports their survival on the streets. How can we better support and protect street-connected children and enable them to play with freedom and in safety, how can we ensure their right to play?

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ORCID iD

Sally Atkinson-Sheppard  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0626-4483>

Note

1. The NGOs covered in the in-depth interviews were (i) CPCS (Child Protection Center and Services), (ii) CWIN-Nepal (Child Workers in Nepal), (iii) Sathai Saath, (iv) VOC (Voice of Children), (v) UCEP Nepal (Underprivileged Children's Education Program) and (vi) SOBER Recovery Children Treatment and Rehabilitation Center.

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Author biographies

Prof. Govind Subedi is currently an Executive Director of Center for the Study of Population and Development – a private research firm in Kathmandu, Nepal, and he is also affiliated with Tribhuvan University (TU), Kathmandu, Nepal, as a teaching part-time faculty. He was the former Senate Member of TU and former Head of Central Department of Population Studies, TU. He did Master's in Development Studies from Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), den Hague, the Netherlands, and he earned his PhD from Center for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India. His areas of expertise are social justice, gender-based violence, rights of migrant workers, human trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation of children and street children. Prof. Subedi worked with different Ministries of Government of Nepal, ILO/IPEC, UNFPA, Amnesty International and Freedom Foundation including Nepal's National Human Rights Commission as his capacity of a research/evaluation consultant. Prof. Subedi has published a number of research-based articles related to his areas of expertise in peer-reviewed national and international journals. As his professional activism, Prof. Subedi is at present the Secretary of Nepal JNU alumni, a life member of Indian Sociological Society (ISS) and a board member of CWIN Nepal – a leading national child rights non-governmental organization in Nepal.

Sally Atkinson-Sheppard was awarded her PhD from King's College London after completing an ethnographic study into street children's involvement in organised crime in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Sally began her career as a researcher for the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) in London, where she worked with young offenders engaged in violent offending, developed the MPS first Gangs Manual and represented the MPS in a collaborative study with the British Prison Service which explored the psychology of gang-related violence. Sally went

on to advise on a variety of criminal justice reform projects in Bangladesh, including leading the Bangladesh Prison Directorate and the Bangladesh Anti-Corruption Commission through the development of their first strategic plans. She then lived in Beijing for 3 years where she led a study into migrant children's involvement in gangs and organised crime in China. Sally now works as a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Westminster. Sally's research has been published in various journals including *the British Journal of Criminology*, *Critical Criminology*, *Asian Journal of Criminology*, *Child Abuse and Neglect* and *Journal of Public Health* among others. Her first book: *The Gangs of Bangladesh; Mastaans, Street Gangs and 'Illicit Child Labourers' in Dhaka*. Palgrave Macmillan, was awarded the Asian Society of Criminology distinguished book award in 2020. Sally frequently presents her work at international conferences and universities including the University of Cambridge, Oxford University, King's College London, Hong Kong University and the University of Dhaka. Sally's current research focuses on county lines in the UK, specifically coercion, control and young people's agency. She is involved in studies which consider street children's relationship with play and the UNCRC and gang member life histories. Sally's research also develops comparative analysis of street children's involvement in gangs and organised crime in Asia (notably Bangladesh, China and Nepal) and, in collaboration with colleagues in Nepal, the first study into street children's involvement in gangs and organised crime in Kathmandu. She is writing her second book, *Through the Lens of Labour: Developing Pan-Asia Understandings of Young people's Involvement in Gangs and Organised Crime*. The book will propose and develop a new theoretical framework for considering juvenile offending 'through the lens of labour'.

Mr. Vinay Jha is currently a visiting Associate Professor, Graduate School of Law, Mid-West University, Birendranagar, Surkhet, Nepal. He did Master's in Sociology from Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal. He is waiting for the final viva voce exam of PhD in Sociology from Tribhuvan University. In addition, he has also earned Master's of Law from Dhaka International University, Bangladesh. He is the Criminologist and Criminal Justice Sector expert and initiator of 'community policing approach' in Nepal. He worked with the United Nations Mission as Advisor in Sudan (UNMIS), Croatia (UNPROFOR) and Kosovo (UNMIK). He also worked as regional coordinator of GIZ, Bangladesh, in 'Rule of Law' program. He worked with Anti-Corruption Commission of Bangladesh to prepare their first strategic plan. His empirical research included mainly in child labor, pedophiles, street children and organised crime and women trafficking in Nepal.