



# ‘Playing to survive’; street-connected children and the right to play in Bangladesh and Nepal

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## Abstract

This article considers conceptualisations of play through the lens of street-connected children in Asia (specifically Bangladesh and Nepal). For the young people discussed in this article – children who live on the streets – play forms an important and varied role in their lives. However, play is also inextricably linked to navigating lives and livelihoods, mitigating risk and survival. The article demonstrates how street-connected children face unique challenges in accessing their right to play, including a failure of states to uphold this fundamental human right, the implications of which are discussed.

## Keywords

street children, play, organised crime, Bangladesh, Nepal, UNCRC

## Introduction

The right to play is considered an integral part of childhood (UNCRC, 1989). Around the world, scholars consider the availability of play and its importance in children’s socialisation, education and overall wellbeing (Lott, 2023). International agreements, such

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as the UNCRC and Article 31, propose that rest, leisure and play are fundamental children's rights. Yet, little is known about how street-connected children access play, particularly in Asia. To address this lacuna, the article draws on two qualitative case studies with street-connected children in Bangladesh and Nepal to consider conceptualisations of play, the realisation of play and the implementation of Article 31 in Dhaka and Kathmandu. For the young people discussed in this article, play is not absent but inextricably linked to navigating lives and livelihoods, mitigating risk and surviving on the streets. The article demonstrates how street-connected children face unique challenges in accessing their right to play, including a failure of states to uphold this fundamental human right.

## Street-connected children and conceptualisations of play

Numerous scholars have discussed the imperative role of play in childhood. Play is argued to be deeply embedded within the political, social and cultural context in which it occurs (Punch, 2003). Du Plessis (2018: 128) proposes that play is a dynamic movement involved in everyday activities and is 'not an occasion of pure waste, but rather a powerful and creative force that can generate a difference in various domains of life'. Play can be seen as a medium of learning and development, and a state of mind essential for social development (Wu et al., 2018). Play is associated with a 'culture of childhood', creativity, wellbeing, happiness, health and representative of cultural practices and traditions (UNCRC, 1989). However, defining play is notoriously challenging largely because play is a socially constructed concept (Punch, 2003). Despite this, and for this article, we consider play to be what children choose to do when they are not engaged in other activities, including schooling and work (James et al., 1998). Play is thus related to enjoyment and fun (Garvey 1977) and can include what Göncü et al. (1999) refer to as 'object play', which involves toys or objects, 'physical play' related to gross motor actions, 'imaginative play', play involving words, sounds or language or structured play, including games or activities governed by rules. In relation to street-connected children, play is also a powerful tool for solidarity and survival (Wu et al., 2018). Play, for many of the world's children, is also closely related to work (Punch, 2003) – and risk is discussed in more depth as this article progresses.

As the Committee on the Rights of the Child has pointed out, play opportunities are increasingly challenging for children across the world, mainly due to mass urbanisation, increasing violence (often in cities) and the commercialisation of play (UNCRC, 1989). Yet there is a consensus that play forms an imperative part of childhood and, as discussed regarding The United National Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a child's fundamental right. This is illustrated in Article 31, which states:

Every child has the right 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. That member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life. They shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activity.

Article 31 represents an aspirational goal, and as The Committee on the Rights of the Child (1989: 5) argues in its General Comment No. 17, 'play, rest and leisure are as important for children's development as the basics of nutrition, housing, healthcare and education'. However, as the General Comment outlines, there are issues related to implementing the article across states and for vulnerable children, particularly those who live on the streets. Significantly, an explicit discussion of street-connected children is missing from the General Comment, highlighting the marginalisation of some of the world's most vulnerable children and an additional barrier to implementation.

Across the world, millions of children are 'street-affiliated' (Thomas De Benitez, 2011). These children face many challenges, including access to housing, healthcare, and education and which leads to widespread social exclusion and vulnerability (Ennew and Swart-Kruger, 2003). However, it is essential to acknowledge the diverse lives that street-connected children lead and the problematic nature of assuming street-connected children are a 'homogenous group' (Punch, 2003). Definitions of street children reflect the complexity of the debate, including discussions of children 'of' the streets, i.e., those young people who live on the streets, and children 'on' the streets, i.e., those young people who work on the streets but live elsewhere (UNICEF 1986). Alternatively, 'children with street connections' or 'street-connected children' offer more nuanced ways to describe children who are street-involved (Thomas De Benitez, 2011). Aptekar and Heinonen (2003: 1) argue that:

Street children do not form a homogeneous group, nor do their life circumstances remain constant. Besides the natural transition from childhood to adolescence and adulthood, children's involvement in street life and family contact varies. Furthermore, children may be represented in one or more of the three categories ("on" the street, "of" the street and "on and off" the street) at different times of their lives and careers in the streets.

Thus, street-connected children change, grow up and have varying and complex relationships with the streets; because of this, scholars propose a move away from trying to identify a 'typical' street child (Ennew and Swart-Kruger, 2003). Research highlights the agency of street-connected children (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017; Tisdall & Punch, 2012), focusing on their street 'careers,' their movement into and out of street life, and the fluid, non-static nature of their lived realities (Van Blerk, 2005: 6). Because of this, throughout the article, we utilise the term 'street-connected' children to describe young people with varying relationships with the streets, this is reflective of children - like the ones in our studies that live on the streets, but also in slums and at times, within NGOs as discussed in our research.

Children who live on the streets face specific challenges including poverty, illiteracy, discrimination and lack of accessible resources (WHO, 2012). Extant research suggests that street-connected children are often excluded from social communities. In these instances, 'play' helps children to develop their own communities, essential for survival on the streets (Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003). Friberg and Martinsson (2017) focus on the importance of 'play' in a child's adaptation to the streets while other scholars reflect on the relationship between play and work (Tyler et al. 1987). Schwartzman (1977: 14) discusses how 'the dichotomy of work and play is a Western one which is not prevalent in

non-industrialised cultures', highlighting the importance of understanding how work and play interact for children who live their lives on the streets and something for The Committee on the Rights to the Child to consider more extensively.

Tyler et al. (1987) discusses how street-connected children do not have access to normative (influenced by Global North assumptions) environments of play (for example, playgrounds, toys, etc.). The authors argue that such children often inhabit adult worlds, navigating work, risk and survival. For example, children play with rubbish, stones, mud, and garbage dumps and build fantasy towers, houses, forts and wagons (ibid.). They also use improvised materials and imagination to play roles – doctors, interviewers, and broadcasters. Nevertheless, their activities can include danger: 'they jump on the rear bumpers of cars, trucks, and buses for rides or as contests among themselves (ibid.:15)'.

Children who live on the streets engage in collective games, often in groups, which helps them to establish bonds with one another (Scanlon et al., 1993). Play also forms a vital socialisation process, which often helps children develop coping strategies for life on the streets (Ennew and Swart-Kruger, 2003). By playing games, children build solidarity, and during play, children share emotions, creating a sense of belonging (ibid.). However, play often includes an element of risk. Playing with other children allows them to form groups or gangs, which, in turn, helps them with coping with life on the street (Ennew and Swart-Kruger, 2003). According to Ennew and Swart-Kruger (2003), who considered street-connected children in Rio de Janeiro, street groups are a prototype of families for children in Brazil and become a tool for survival on the streets. According to Rodwell and Cavalcanti (1998:30), 'children who live on the streets are permanently subject to a cycle of violence, [...] and no longer have time to be children and have to substitute the carelessness and playfulness of childhood to their unceasing struggle to survive'. The World Health Organization (2012) argues that personal strength and peer groups support street-connected children's ability to survive on the streets, stressing the importance of 'belonging' to these vulnerable children. Njord et al. (2010: 208) support this proposition when they argue that street connections allow children to 'commonly group together as a way of replacing emotional and economic support'. Paradoxically, children may be drawn to the streets because of the perceived freedom and independence of playing in the streets (Beazley, 2003). In this way, play can also be seen as something that attracts children to the streets, as well as an activity that interacts with work, solidarity and survival.

In many instances, play supports bonds and group affiliation, which, for some young people, can result in gang activity and crime. According to Gogua (2020: 237), 'legal prosecution does not apply to children under the age of 14 in Georgia, which can lead to "impunity syndrome" in minors'. A similar situation was observed by Atkinson-Sheppard (2017, 2019, 2022) in Bangladesh and China, where older children often force younger ones to commit crime, knowing that, because of their age, they are likely to avoid criminal prosecution.

There are thus various disparities between the commitments undertaken by States Parties to the CRC about Article 31 CRC and the realities of children's lives on the streets. The CRC requires state parties to allocate resources to ensure children can access rest, leisure and play however, as these discussions highlight, this is largely unattainable for children that live on the streets. To critically address these assumptions and to consider

the realities of implementation of Article 31 the article deliberates conceptualisations of play via the lens of street-connected children in Bangladesh and Nepal. By drawing on both reflective and primary analysis of data gathered with street-connected children, former street-connected children, and practitioners in Dhaka and Kathmandu, the article considers notions of play, opportunities for play and Article 31, arguing that for the street-connected children discussed in this article, play is not absent, but inextricably linked to navigating lives and livelihoods, mitigating risk and surviving on the streets. Furthermore, a lack of implementation of Article 31 means that the Nepalese and Bangladeshi states are not upholding the fundamental rights of some of their most marginalised citizens.

## Methodology

The data gathered for this research is both primary and reflective. The primary analysis is based on interviews (10 in total) with participants in Bangladesh and Nepal, including practitioners who work with street-connected children and staff from the police, government departments, and NGOs. The data also includes eight focus group discussions with 45 ‘ex-street children’ (nine females and 36 males), all of whom had once lived and worked on the streets but are now associated with NGOs that provide them with housing and support. Each focus group was based in the Kathmandu valley, lasting between 1 and 1.5 hours and conducted at five different NGOs. The reflective analysis is based on two large-scale studies conducted by the first author in Bangladesh and by the first author and research team (second and third authors) in Nepal, respectively. Both studies considered the involvement of street-connected children in gangs and organised crime and were thus not explicitly focused on the notion of street-connected children and play. Despite this, play, access to play, and its relationship to risk, work, and survival were essential themes in both studies. Because of this, the first author revisited the data and considered the findings in light of the right to play.

The first study, which considered street children’s involvement in organised crime in Bangladesh, consisted of over 3 years of participant observation of the criminal justice system, 80 interviews (42 semi-structured and 38 unstructured interviews) with criminal justice practitioners (including police officers and prison staff), NGO workers and community members and a year-long embedded case study with a group of 22 street children, and the organisation that housed and supported them. The first author conducted this study while living and working in Bangladesh.

The second study is underway, and the research team has collected data in Nepal. The team have conducted a survey with 40 participants, 40 interviews with criminal justice practitioners (police officers and prison staff), NGO workers and community members, workshops with 20 street-connected children and interviews with 15 ex-street children.

The studies adhere to the University of Westminster and King’s College London codes of ethical conduct. All participants (including the children) received an information sheet and signed a consent form. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The research included a ‘research sensitivity protocol’ (including several areas, such as observing participants for signs of distress, ensuring that participants were aware that they could stop the interviews/focus groups at any time and without giving a reason, etc.)

particularly significant for the interviews with the young people. Engagement and rapport were supported by the first author's engagement with the NGO that houses and supports the children in Dhaka and the research team in Nepal's extensive local knowledge and expansive connections in Kathmandu.

The primary data considered the specific relationship between street-connected children and play. The interview questions focused on conceptualisations of rest, leisure and play and the application of Article 31 in Nepal. The reflective analysis drew upon already conducted data, which was re-analysed using the same framework. The data were catalogued and coded; descriptive and then thematic analysis occurred. This was conducted for each phase of the research and each sample set, and then it was triangulated, where data from the primary data collection phase was considered alongside data from the two larger studies.

## Findings and discussion

The findings from the data illustrate several important overarching themes. First, play forms an important and varied role in street children's lives. Second, as aforementioned, because of the vulnerabilities that street-connected children face, play is closely entangled with work, risk and survival. Finally, obligations on state parties arising from Article 31 CRC have not been upheld by state governments concerning street-connected children.

Assessing the exact numbers of street children in Nepal and Bangladesh is difficult. However, broader contexts of political instability, war and conflict, urbanisation and widespread slum living and poverty in both countries (Pradhan et al., 2015) have led to significant numbers of children living on the streets, particularly in urban areas, including Dhaka and Kathmandu. Pradhan et al. (2015) suggests that the number of street-connected children in Nepal is estimated at around 5,000, with over one-fifth living in the Kathmandu Valley. Numbers of street-connected children are higher in Bangladesh, approximately 500,000 by some estimates (ARISE, 2001) or over one million by others, highlighting issues related to assessing the numbers of street-connected children and wider problems of a lack of birth certificates and the varying terminology discussed earlier (Thomas De Benitez, 2011).

Scholars discuss the lives of street-connected children in both countries and highlight the endemic violence experienced by children on the streets (World Bank, 2007) and challenges related to accessing basic sanitation, employment, education and housing (Rahman, 1985). Street-connected children in Bangladesh and Nepal are often victims of exploitation and abuse, experience a multitude of health problems and rarely have access to consistent education (Ennew and Swart-Kruger, 2003); in short, they face a lack of protection for their rights, including their right to play.

### *Street-connected children and the role of play*

The role of play is multifaceted and varied. Children who live on the streets are not a homogenous group (Aptekar and Heinonen, 2003), nor is their relationship with play (Punch, 2003). This is representative of discussions of the changing lives of street

children, their varying relationship with the streets and their involvement in wider activities, including work (Thomas De Benitez, 2011). Furthermore, types of play are specific to individual children, differing among cities, countries, individuals and age groups. However, consistent themes appeared in our data. These themes related to the nature and location of play, which for street-connected children occurs almost entirely on the streets, alongside their peers and with no adult supervision. For example, Sunil explained:

We always play in different places of the streets. Sometimes, it's the same place but not always. These places are abandoned grass areas, warehouse ruins, corners of streets, temple areas and funeral places as well. On hot days, we play on the streets which empty out after 10 pm. We also go swimming in the rivers.

Bikram concurred: I liked to play lot when I was on the streets. We used to play a *chudum* (tag) game. I used to sing songs while roaming around the street. I like *dohori* (folk songs) very much. We used to return to our shelter in the evening. We used to eat whatever we have collected, play and make lot of noise.

Göncü et al.'s (1999) conceptualisations of play discussed earlier has some relevance to our data, for example, the young people we spoke to often engaged in imaginative play, there was also evidence of 'object play' although this rarely involved manufactured toys but rather, specifically in Nepal, cards (including UNO), football (using a ball made of old socks), breaking bricks, playing with stones or rubbish, playing *guchcha* (marbles), *gatti* (a stone-throwing game), *dandi biyo* (a traditional game played in Nepal with a stick and wooden pin), *dori nagne* (skipping) or *linge-ping* (swinging) if near to trees. One of NGO workers in Nepal explained further:

Street children choose games which require almost no resources like football. They only need used old socks, which is available very easily in a street. All the group members can be a part of the game. Sometimes they put bets on who will win the game, like money or alcohol. Seven tones is also a game which is popular among street children. Players are divided in two teams: one attempts to crumble vertically arranged stones with a ball and another group attempts to rebuild it. No resources are required in this game, it is only the seven pieces of stone an open ground and players.

Aditya, one of the street-connected children in Nepal described several games in greater depth:

We used to play *khopi*, which is a game in which there can be more than two players. The player throws a coin or stone from a certain distance into a small hole dug in the ground. The winner is the one who successfully throws the coin or stone in the small hole. We used to bet for tea and cold drinks, so the loser would have to get them for the winner. I also enjoy playing marbles. The girls I knew often used to play *gatti*, a game played by two or more players with five stones. But it depends, there is no fixed time and place for this play, we just play when we can.

As such, street-connected children improvise and utilise everyday objects to support various forms of play. This included watching television through hotel or shop windows. The young people we spoke also engaged in physical play, including pretend fighting, chasing etc. as Bijay explained:

We fight in groups, just for fun, it's not real. When I lived on the street, sometimes we met children from the community, we saw them playing football in a school compound. I wanted to join with them, but they used to scold me saying I was a street child – *khate* [derogative term].

Thus, street-connected children face hardships in accessing resources and safe spaces in which to play. They also experience marginalisation from other children who can access opportunities for play readily and often within the context of school or families, as discussed in this quotation.

Many of the young people we spoke to were orphans or lived apart from their families, on the streets or at NGOs, this means that their need for parental support was often missing and because of this these children used play to build and maintain social relationships, necessary to ensure their survival on the streets and thus in alliance with [Tyler et al. \(1987\)](#) and [Scanlon et al. \(1993\)](#)'s research discussed earlier.

The data illustrated a dichotomy between how children play on the streets and the types of play available to them when they engage with NGOs. In these contexts, NGOs play key roles as facilitators of play and providers of resources to support play. An NGO worker in Dhaka explained further: 'In the big cities, there are some drop-in-centres run by NGOs, but they're very poor in number compared to the number of street children, however, street children can come and take rest, and play. They often play in-house'. There is an essential distinction between the types of play available to street children. The first is primarily conducted outside, on the streets and often associated with risk, with limited or no resources and 'child-led'. The second, associated with NGOs or wider support services, is usually at a specific location, inside, adult-led and with adult supervision. In these instances, children can access resources to play with: books, toys and opportunities for rest in a safe and secure environment. Thus, children's right to play is upheld. However, it is essential to note that these support services are often delivered by independent NGOs, not by the state, illustrating a lack of implementation by state parties of Article 31 in Bangladesh and Nepal.

The distinction between the two types of play was apparent in Bangladesh, where the first author conducted a 3-year study of street children's involvement in organised crime. As part of this study, the first author carried out a year-long embedded case study with 22 street-connected children and the organisation that supports them. The children lived at the NGO from Sunday to Thursday (the Bengali working week) and, in most instances, returned to their homes in the slums or on the streets in Dhaka on weekends. The children had lived and worked on the streets before engaging with the organisation. The NGO provides an in-depth and comprehensive support package for the young people, enabling access to accommodation, education, food - and play.

During the research, the first author identified a distinct dichotomy between 'inside' and 'outside' environments for rest, leisure, and play—categories constructed by the children themselves. An extract from a fieldnote explains further:

The NGO is based on one floor of an apartment. It has six rooms. There is a basic kitchen with a gas stove and a small sink. I've never noticed a fridge. There is a small but clean dining room with a long table big enough for the children to fit around. There are bars on the windows and the children's paintings are hung from string across the room, they flutter in the wind. There are two classrooms; they are bright and colourful, and there are toys and books in cabinets against the wall. The main room has one large door, which opens to a balcony. This is a blessing during the summer months or the monsoon. The balcony is small and overlooks a slum area, and I often ponder the children living outside<sup>1</sup>.

The distinctions between 'inside' and 'outside' were illustrated by the colours of the NGO, the children's bright paintings on the walls, the toys in one of the rooms and the safety the centre provided. The children were aware of this difference, outlining how they enjoyed the facilities of the NGO, explaining that it was safe, clean and thus provided conditions to facilitate rest, leisure and play; they contrasted this to life on the streets and slums, which was 'noisy and dirty', associated with a multitude of risks, Aarna, aged, nine explained further:

I don't like to go outside. I like to spend most of my time here [in the NGO] it is a nice and clean place, I have the chance to study, and I learn how to build myself up, how to respect others and how to make myself a good person.

The distinction between life inside and outside became a persistent theme in the study, a quandary reflected on by the first author in a fieldnote:

The children live in what seems to be a sense of denial; it feels as though they don't want to think of being 'outside'. Their words say it all, yet many have families which remain outside of the organisation's pseudo walls. I wonder how these relationships have been affected, for the better and for the worse, by the inclusion of these children within this programme. Sometimes I forget that they live in the slums; even though many return there on weekends. I wonder why this reality evades me, yet I know it is because I often do not want to face their reality; this must be an inkling of how the children feel about their life 'outside'<sup>2</sup>.

The preferences and distinctions made by the children reflect their varying notions of play, rest and leisure and the embodiment of these rights. The NGO fulfilled this right by providing a holistic and intensive support package to the children, unavailable to them while living on the streets. This raises wider questions regarding service provision and accessibility. There were only 22 children engaged with the NGO in a city where millions of children live on the streets, and even this was a massive challenge for the Director of the organisation to maintain, primarily due to limited funds. Furthermore, and as discussed earlier, it was the NGO that provided the conditions and resources to facilitate play and not the state in this context, questioning the implementation of Article 31 in Bangladesh.

It was outside of the boundaries of the study to consider the effects living at the NGO had on the children and their families. However, the first author witnessed close bonds between the staff at the centre and the children and between the children. The children

also spoke about their families and informed the first author when they were visiting home or when a relative was coming to see them at the NGO. The director of the NGO explained that families were grateful for the support the organisation provides for their children and that she was committed to ensuring that the young people remain in close contact with their families. Despite this, the long-term effects of living apart from family members remain unknown. Research is needed to explore this impact of this further, particularly in relation to children's rights, development, education, prospects, and broader issues such as enjoyment and play.

Similar issues were apparent in Nepal as an NGO worker explained: 'If children are on the streets, their right to play is unavailable to them, but if they are looked after by different organisations, these rights are exercised by the children. In the NGO, children are able to practice these rights'. Another NGO worker concurred: 'We have a well-managed accommodation facility for the children at the center, they have enough leisure and play time within the premises of the center'. One of the young people, Rahul, aged 16, lived at an NGO during the research. He explained: 'Here is good. You can talk here, you can read. You can play with friends. You can watch television, and there is open space. I remember my past life walking around the streets in Thamel, smoking cannabis, I did good to come here'. Rahul highlights the importance of the support delivered by NGOs, a lack of input from the Nepalese state, questioning how street-connected children 'outside' can access their right to rest, leisure and play, likely unattainable in this context.

### *Play and its relationship with work, risk and survival*

Street-connected children often play on the streets and, when doing so, face several risks; in many instances, children's play interacts with work and survival. In both research sites, the data highlighted risks faced by children living on the streets including acute poverty, a lack of access to housing, resources or threats from gangs and organised crime groups, the police, political violence and general disturbances and disagreements in busy and congested slums. All of which affect a child's ability to access play, rest and leisure. There is thus a blurring of boundaries between work, risk and play as an NGO worker in Nepal explained:

I often see street children doing dual tasks. First, they are playing with their friends and seniors; second, they are engaged in other tasks such as begging, selling products, asking for food. Most of the time, they are playing 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 within their group.

In these instances, children manage risks associated with work and their need to earn money to survive with opportunities for play and interaction with their peers. Sabal, aged 16, explained: 'I collect plastic bottles, irons and garbage in Balkhu. I sell this to make money. While looking for them, I also enjoy swimming in the Bagmati River. There is water in the river in the summer'.

Brijesh, one of the ex-street connected children in Nepal described a similar situation:

We used to roll the tyre of bicycle wheels, we roamed around the vegetable market and went swimming and watched films on TVs in shops. In the mornings, shopkeepers would throw garbage in containers behind the road. We collected this garbage, sold it to *kawadi* shops and earned money doing so. We gambled with friends with this money. My friends and I also enjoyed buying tea or cold drinks with this money.

The distinction between work and play is obfuscated for street-connected children. As Brijesh and Sabal illustrate, street-connected children utilise opportunities for earning money alongside chances to play, socialise and relax. There are no clear distinctions between these activities. Because of this street-connected children are denied their right to play without wider distractions or work, risk and survival.

An NGO worker in Bangladesh explained further: 'I have seen street children playing on the railway platform. They were jumping from a resting train one after another. They were also playing, hiding from one another in different train compartments. The presence of street-connected children at railway stations is a common occurrence in Bangladesh; it is a natural progression for children to use these locations as areas of play. However, the risks involved are tangible and extensive. A practitioner in Nepal explained further:

Street children's lives are not easy. Street life is challenging labour. To think about the right to play and to think about their leisure is difficult in the context when they are excluded from access to basic needs and survival. The streets are also an unsafe place to live. Street children spend their daily lives on the streets when thousands of people cross the road, in heavy traffic, and in hazardous living places. They are not always in the position to get the opportunity to rest, leisure and play compared to children in the community.

Our data also illustrates how work and play interact with crime. Kalpana, explained further:

We used to play card games, hide and seek, sometimes we bet for money. Also, there are people who come for picnics in public places and gardens. We help them by cleaning dishes and carrying water for them. That is a good time for me to dance to the music they play. I really enjoyed dancing. When we play, we also rehearse how to snatch money from travellers or people walking on the streets. We used to snatch and steal from another gang when we did not have money to eat. We stole food when we could. I used to steal in a way that I knew I would not get punished. Normally, I rob drunkards from street and dance bars. That money helps our survival.

Kalpana's experience exemplifies the blurring of boundaries between work, play and survival. Her explanation moves quickly between all three notions, demonstrating no clear division between these activities. Kalpana seeks opportunities for dancing and listening to music while clearing dishes and carrying water. Play is also preparation for committing crime which, as Kalpana describes is largely conducted due to the need to earn money to survive.

The data from both Bangladesh and Nepal also demonstrated the close relationship between play, friendships and drug use. Anish, now 20 spoke about his experiences of living on the streets as a child:

I stayed in *Kalimati*. I met many of my friends there. We worked together to collect plastic bottles or other bits of plastic and sell it to the *kawadi* shop. I started smoking cigarettes, hashish, and dendrite with my friends and I forgot about my home. It was fun when I was with friends. There was no stress, just a carefree life. I did not want to go home. It was more enjoyable there. I was happy. We smoked hashish together. We played together. We danced in the street when we were on a high.

For many young people, initial interactions with peer groups on the streets is a precursor to involvement in crime related to competition and 'shared risk' or the nature of some games, as discussed by an NGO worker in Nepal: 'To play the game of PUBG, they require money and to get this money they may commit a theft, break into a shop, pickpocket or loot travellers in the street'. Our research illuminates the importance of challenging normative, and often Global North assumptions that there are clear distinctions between work, crime and play. The data demonstrates how street-connected children engage in crime as a means to earn money, commit robberies or thefts collectively and use drugs alongside their peers, all of which is closely related to play or leisure time. It is thus importance to consider the relationships between these activities, rather than considering them as separate and disparate, reflective of the realities of street-connected children's lives.

### *Consideration of article 31*

Article 31 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to rest, leisure and play, as well as the right to engage in cultural and artistic life. Our data demonstrates that street-connected children realise their own right to play using innovation and ingenuity, they utilise things they find on the streets to play with, they socialise in groups and use imagination and role play to obtain a sense of freedom and release from the pressures of life on the streets. However, children's rights should not be fulfilled solely by children themselves. Furthermore, broader aspects of Article 31 are not realised for street-connected children in Bangladesh and Nepal, their access to rest, leisure and play free from responsibilities, risk and the need to survive are severely hampered by the realities of their lives on the streets. In these contexts, children are unable to fully access their right to play.

Broader aspects of Article 31 are unobtainable for street-connected children. A practitioner in Dhaka explained: 'Street-connected children in Bangladesh have no access or hardly access to rest or places to rest, they cannot enjoy leisure time and play since the cities are overcrowded, no playgrounds are available to them'. One of the ex-street-connected children we spoke to, Mahant, aged 25, reflected on his life on the streets and his accessibility to safe spaces to play: 'I lived on the streets throughout my childhood. We collected garbage from the *Kalimati* vegetable and fruit wholesale shops. There was a playground close to where we lived but it was closed for us, it was for those who go to

school'. Admission to designated areas of play is challenging for street children; they are often forcibly removed from parks or public spaces and are resigned to playing on the streets and with limited resources. Access to 'cultural and artistic life' is an abstract notion for children on the streets. There is an obligation on both the Bangladeshi and Nepalese states that arises under Article 31 of the UNCRC to provide all children with access to rest, leisure and play. However, as our data has illuminated, in many instances, this obligation is not being fulfilled.

Our data indicates the need for an expanded and context-sensitive implementation of Article 31 that recognises play, leisure and risk as deeply intertwined within the everyday lives of street-connected children. The stark absence of safe and responsible adults in these children's lives leaves them highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. When these realities are overlooked, critical opportunities for child protection and for disrupting recruitment pathways into organised crime are missed.

The notion of adequate rest is largely unavailable to street children; as the participants discussed, street-connected children sleep on the streets and often in risky locations, exposed to changing weather, violence and exploitation. One of the ex-street-connected children we spoke to in Bangladesh, Sharif, explained how 'their [street children] sleeping locations are also subject to change, and usually uncomfortable, using newspapers as pillows and rarely having sufficient blankets to keep warm'. Similar issues arise when considering leisure. A practitioner in Bangladesh explained: 'They [street children] hardly understand the concept of rest and leisure, since their lives don't allow them to think about such things'. Sharif, concurred: 'Life on the streets is all-encompassing; you live minute to minute, focused on your survival'. An NGO worker in Nepal discussed similar themes:

It is difficult for street-based children to have the time to play a game. On top of this, they are living in unsafe and risky conditions. They do not necessarily have daily work. They have little idea of where they will spend their nights, and they're not sure of their food either. Matters of play and rest for these children are just like a story.

Article 31 also includes 'participation in cultural and artistic activities'; there was widespread consensus among the data that this was an unrealistic and unachievable aim for children who live on the streets and for whom life is focused on work and survival. An NGO worker explained: 'Street-connected children engaging in cultural and artistic life is like a Nepali proverb, to dream of unattainable things'.

## **Implications for research, policy and practice**

The UNCRC issued a General Comment No. 17 Article 31 in 2013. The General Comment outlines the challenges faced in implementing Article 31, particularly for marginalised groups of young people. There is no explicit mention of street children. However, the general comment refers to the holistic nature of Article 31, its relationship with wider rights, and the importance of rest, leisure, and play to children's wellbeing, health, and education. General Comment No. 21 was issued in 2017 with particular reference to children in street situations. The general comment focuses on implementing a

rights-based approach for street-connected children and state parties to deliver services to accommodate leisure, rest and play activities. There is a reference to inclusion and ensuring that street-connected children have access to local parks and playgrounds. It states that it is important ‘to adopt measures to assist street-connected children in developing their creativity and practising sport, including with mobile recreation and sports facilities’ (p19). The realisation of this right is particularly challenging in light of street children. Overall, there is a lack of association between Article 31 and street children, not sufficiently addressed by General Comment 21, something the Committee on the Rights of the Child should consider in far greater depth.

There are thus various lacunas when considering the relationship between street children, play, leisure and rest and extant policy and legislation. There are other issues scarcely discussed within any of the above-mentioned documents; risk, work and survival are marginalised in this discourse. In addition, issues facing children around the world, navigating social spaces online, the development of relationships and leisure via social media, and children’s vulnerabilities in the ‘digital era’ are all under-researched in relation to children who live their lives on the streets and will – despite limited resources, still be impacted by this global and significant social developments.

The discussions in this article highlight opportunities to better engage street-connected children in the debate and focus specifically on their rights, including those related to play. However, there is a great deal of work to be done to realise street children’s right to play. To do this, an expansive and multifaceted approach must be taken, reflecting on the very conceptualisations that underpin such global agreement and the marginalisation of children who do not necessarily fit within global North ideas of children and childhoods.

## Conclusion

This article considered street children’s right to rest, leisure and play. By drawing on data gathered in Bangladesh and Nepal, the article argued that for street-connected children, play is far from homogenous and forms an important and complex role in their lives. It is, in many instances, closely related to wider issues children face, notably work, risk and survival. The article discussed the gaps between the current situations of street-affiliated children and extant global agreements, including international human rights law instruments, specifically the CRC and Article 31. The preoccupation with certain ‘types’ of childhoods, which develop a homogenous notion of what it means to be a child, associated with freedom, education, and play (Liebel, 2020) means that the realities of millions of children’s lives are marginalised in the discourse. The study highlights several areas which the Committee on the Rights to the Child should consider more extensively. This includes the unique challenges that street-connected children face in accessing the right to play and the relationship between play, risk and work. Far greater research and change need to occur to understand street children’s lives and provide them with access to services and resources which are supportive and enable them to live their lives in safety. For the children discussed in this article and those like them, play is not absent but inextricably linked to navigating lives and livelihoods, mitigating risk and surviving on the streets. Furthermore, implementation of Article 31, specifically related to street-connected children is weak, meaning that states are failing to protect street-children’s

right to play or create conditions in which the complexity of this right, in terms of rest, leisure and cultural activities is realised. This leaves some of the most vulnerable citizens of both countries invisible, acutely marginalised, and denied access to a fundamental human right.

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## Notes

1. Fieldnote 10, Bangladesh study.
2. Fieldnote 11, Bangladesh study.

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