



## Children's right to play in South Asia: A systematic literature review

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### Abstract

The right to play is not a privilege but a fundamental right of every child. The play has significant advantages, including physical, emotional, psychological, and cognitive. This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) Approach to review the status of the right to play in eight South Asian countries (i.e., Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives) concerning measures taken by the countries to implement Article 31 of the UNCRC and the General Comment No. 17 (GC17). Article 31 and the GC17 were used as the framework of analysis. Through google search, google scholars, and other sources of knowledge, four papers were found directly talking about one or two aspects of children's right to play only in four countries, i.e., Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The SLR revealed that empirical studies lack information about the conditions, challenges, arrangements, and environments related to the right to play in South Asian countries. Besides the absence of studies on tackling challenges and arranging or ensuring specific conditions -as envisaged in the GC17, studies analyzing factors impacting children's play are absent. These factors may include: temporal, spatial, and psychological. Considering this SLR, it is concluded that within the paradigm of children's rights including the anthropology of children and youth, children's right to play in South Asia has received extremely little attention. Thus, the study suggests that special issues should be dedicated by the journals on children's right to play in South Asia and beyond in other parts of the global south.

**Keywords:** Anthropology, children, children's rights to play, refugee, South Asia, UNCRC

### Introduction

A child defined as less than 18 years old has many fundamental rights enshrined in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). In Article 31 of the CRC, a child or children also have the right to play. Thus, the UNCRC, in Article 31, declared play as a fundamental right of every child, not a privilege (Souto-Manning, 2017). The

Committee on the Rights of the Child in General Comment No. 17 defined children's play as "any behavior, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise" (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013: 5). The General Comment has clarified the meaning and importance of the right to play for every nation-state. It identifies obstacles to play and suggests policy and practical measures for policymakers and professionals.

In the recent past, children's right to play has received attention in academic discourse due to its inclusion as an Article 31 in the UNCRC in 1989 (Davey & Lundy, 2010; King & Howard, 2014) and also because of continued advocacy efforts by national and international organizations (Collins, 2019). Today, various functional advantages (emotional, physical, psychological, and cognitive) of children's play are studied by scholars from diverse disciplines, which includes psychology, anthropology, sociology, and child rights experts- a few to mention) (Lester & Russel, 2010; Fearn & Howard, 2012). The act of play has become a routine social practice for children (Skelton, 2009). Children's survival is not only about preserving and maintaining life, but in biological terms, it is about various ways a human could favorably place him or herself in the given environment. They maintain the current position and move to the future by integrating both by responding to the social, cultural, and biological environment (Lester & Russell, 2010).

There is growing research on examining barriers to children's access to play. Research has cited violence, poverty, child labor, domestic work, and the influence of modernization that have constrained the time available to play (Lester & Russell, 2010; United Nations, 2013). Opportunities and levels of satisfaction for children to be involved in free play are restricted under three areas: psychological, spatial, and temporal (Russell, 2006; Long, 2017). Temporal restrictions mean that children's time to play has been reduced. Since children's time has become focused and planned; therefore, there is little opportunity for unplanned activities, including plans (Kytta, 2004). Time for free play has been lost because of extra-curricular activities, test preparation, and school homework (Gleave, 2009). Besides, there are concerns about the suitability of play material available in parks or playgrounds. In Australia, facilities were not tailored towards older children at many such places and had problems accessing appropriate play material (Veitch et al., 2006). There is also a connection between children's well-being and access to play spaces, especially among low socioeconomic groups whose parents struggled to find local and affordable play services in the United Kingdom (Nairn & Ipsos MORI, 2011). Woods and Bond (2018) found that curriculum standards were prioritized over play activities in schools. Spatial factors that confined children's access to play including the quality, choices, and nearness to space (Barclay & Tawil, 2013). Psychological dimensions include subjective and perceptual experiences of space and time, authorization, anger, belonging, and fear (Russell, 2006).

In western countries, children were also restricted from playing in space in the local neighborhood because of safety concerns (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009; Kytta, 2004). In the global north, studies on children's right to play are also conducted to provide children with the right to participate in research (Finney & Atkinson, 2020). In this regard, scholars have emphasized adopting tailored methodologies that consider children's strengths while recognizing their differences from adults (Einarsdottir, 2005). However, studies gaining children's views of their play access and experiences are limited, but they have provided detailed and insightful views, with substantial implications for policy and practice (Kilkelly et al., 2005; Long, 2017). Generally, we notice that children's play is defined from adults' perspectives. The actual play of children and conceptualization of that play by adults (Skelton, 2009; Thomson & Philo, 2004). Thus, it is alleged that adults use play to describe how and what children spend much time for (Thomson &

Philo, 2004). Therefore, many scholars assert that research with children on children's play should be child centered, and it should prioritize children's views, perspectives, and knowledge of play (Lancy, 2012; Play England, 2016).

Recently, the right to play of children has received attention in academic discourse due to its inclusion as an Article 31 in the UNCRC in 1989 (Davey & Lundy, 2011; King & Howard, 2014) and also because of continued advocacy efforts by national and international organizations (Collins & Wright, 2019). Overall studies on children, children's play, the right to play and refugee children's right to play are extremely limited in number which have positioned children in general and refugee children in special, as objects of study and neglected them as social agents in their own right, which is the concern of many scholars including anthropologists. Anthropology of childhood sees children as developing beings, who possess agency and are more vulnerable as compared to adults (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007). However, within the field of childhood studies or anthropology of childhood, there is a dearth of empirical research on contemporary children's play or the right to play. This presents a serious gap in knowledge about contemporary Asian children's play realities. Children's rights to play are taken for granted in areas of research in another field of studies but more specifically in the field of the anthropology of childhood and the anthropology of children and youth.

Therefore, this paper will contribute to the knowledge about children's rights to play in the context of South Asian countries and will also uncover whether countries in South Asia have taken measures to arrange 13 specific conditions and addressed challenges to achieve the maximum play environment.

## Literature review

Literature searches of electronic databases (Elsevier, Web of Knowledge, and Google Scholar) were conducted between January 2010 and December 2020. Also, the search was performed within the International Journal of Children's Rights, the International Journal of Play and Journal of Play Work Practice, and Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social Science. Key search terms used were: children's play; right to play; Article 31 of the UNCRC. With each search term, the name of each country in South Asia was used; for instance, "the right to play" in "Pakistan," "children's play" in "Pakistan"; "children's play" in "Bangladesh," and "the right to play" in Bangladesh." Also, along with these main words, the term South Asia was added. Unfortunately, in the Google Scholar search engine, none of the phrases the right to play in South Asia and children's play in South Asia brought any search results.

The SLR has inclusion and exclusion criteria. The following inclusion criteria were used: (1) all children 18 years old; (2) studies were academic; (3) written in English; (4) subjected to peer review in the academic journal and also Master and Doctorate theses; (5) all children's plays including digital; (6) article 31 of the UNCRC; (7) children and adults' views of play; (8) In South Asia, government policies.

The following exclusion criteria were used: (1) the right to play in South Asian countries; (2) Article 31 of the UNCRC. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff & Altman, 2009) framework was applied to structure the review and maintain accurate records of the process (see Figure 1). Only 22 publications were identified as potentially relevant through search engines, of which 17 were excluded after examining the titles and abstracts. Subsequently, only four full-text articles were

reviewed for eligibility, and these were included as per the criteria (see Figure 1). It is interesting to highlight that the prominent journals publishing on children's rights did not contain empirical articles focusing on South Asian Children's Right to Play and the role of governments in the region. These journals include the International Journal of Children's Rights, International Journal of Play, International Journal of Children's Rights, International Journal of Play and Journal of Play Work Practice, and Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social Science.

## Theoretical framework

This study is guided by the conceptual framework given under Article 31 of the UNCRC and the General Comment No. 17 issued by the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life, and the arts (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). Both provisions have been widely used and cited to promote the right to play in children's lives (Davey & Lundy, 2010). However, governments do not recognize and realize children's right to play; thus, there is a lack of access to safe play environments. Also, there are increasing threats to the volume and nature of play (for instance, commercialization of play services, urbanization, child labor persistence, emergency growth, and growing preoccupation with educational outcomes (McKendrick, Loebach & Casey, 2018). In response to these concerns, The Committee produced the GC17. The GC17 aims to signify the importance of Article 31 and the rights under it and outline the duties of agents and governments ratifying the UNCRC. Besides introduction and objectives, the GC17 has five main sections: It articulates the importance of Article 31 in children's lives; frames the legal foundation of Article 31; situates Article 31 in the broader context of the UNCRC; identify particular groups that needed specific attention; and outlines State parties' duties (McKendrick, Loebach & Casey, 2018; Mannello, Casey & Atkinson, 2020). Among the above main sections, the research has stressed producing the context for the realization of Article 31, which will address the aspects of the best environment and issues to be addressed in the realization of Article 31 (McKendrick, Loebach & Casey, 2018).

The GC15 – as a frame of reference – recognizes that children's right to play will not be realized to a maximum level until 13 specific conditions are arranged. The GC17 has outlined these specific conditions, which cover:

- The social contexts (for instance, freedom from social exclusion)
- The environmental conditions
- Time and space to access play areas and materials
- Opportunities to participate in specified play experiences (for example, play in natural environments), and
- Wider societal acknowledgement of the importance of play (see McKendrick, Loebach, and Casey [2018] for specific conditions or settings described in the GC17).

Additionally, the Committee identified 11 challenges (see details in paragraphs 33 to 47 of the GC17) that must be addressed to arrange and achieve the maximum play environment. These challenges all together are believed the prime universal threats to the right to play (McKendrick, Loebach & Casey, 2018). These challenges include:

- The absence of recognition of the importance of play and recreation
- Hazardous environments
- Opposition to children's use of public spaces

- Non-balancing safety and risk
- The absence of access to the natural environment
- Pressure for educational outcomes
- Excessively structured and programmed agendas
- Neglect of Article 31 in development programs
- Lack of investment in cultural and artistic opportunities for children
- The growing impact of electronic or social media, and
- Commercialization and marketing of play

This article uses these challenges and specific conditions as a framework of references to uncovering whether countries in South Asia have taken measures to arrange 13 specific conditions and addressed challenges to achieve the maximum play environment.

## Method

Literature searches of electronic databases (Elsevier, Web of Knowledge, and Google Scholar) were conducted between January 2010 and December 2020. Also, the search was performed within the International Journal of Children's Rights, the International Journal of Play and Journal of Play Work Practice, and Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social Science. Key search terms used were: children's play; right to play; Article 31 of the UNCRC. With each search term, the name of each country in South Asia was used; for instance, "the right to play" in "Pakistan," "children's play" in "Pakistan"; "children's play" in "Bangladesh," and "the right to play" in Bangladesh." Also, along with these main words, the term South Asia was added. Unfortunately, in the Google Scholar search engine, none of the phrases the right to play in South Asia and children's play in South Asia brought any search results.

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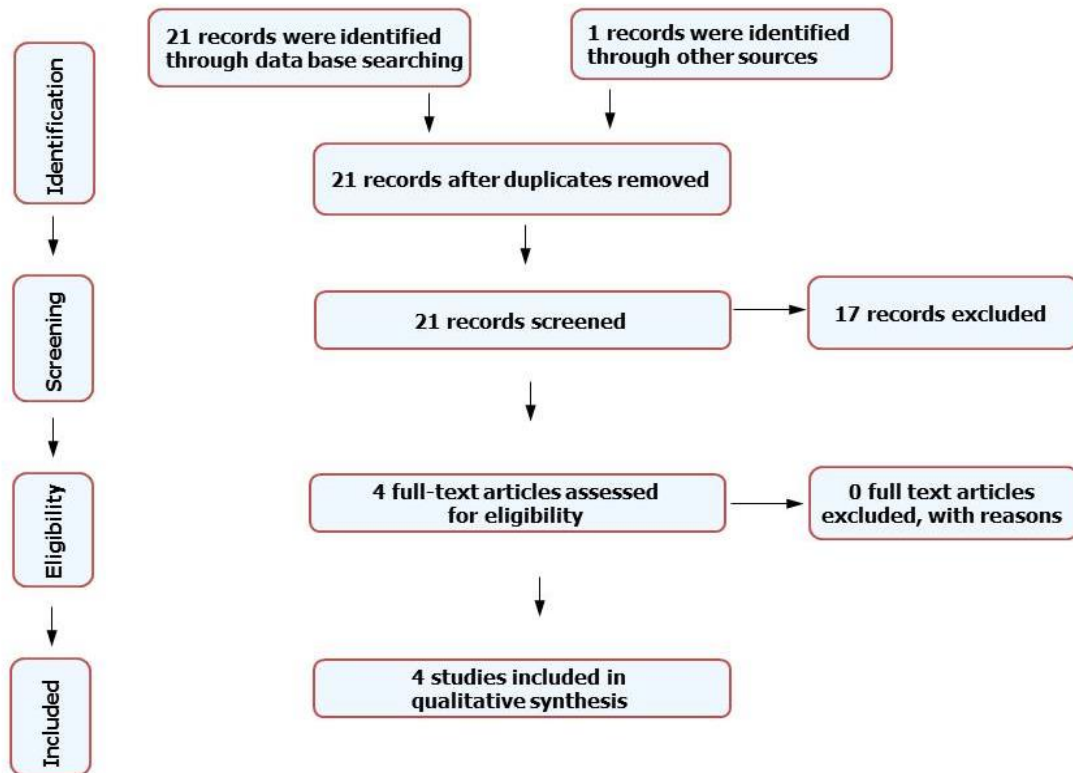


Figure 1. The PRISMA framework

## Results

### *An overview of included papers*

An overview of the included studies is available in Table 1. In Bangladesh, two studies are recorded; one is an MA thesis, one is in Pakistan, and one is in India and Nepal, together with other non-South-Asian countries. However, no academic study was found in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka on any aspect of the Children's right to play.

In Bangladesh, Cross and Islam (2021) explored the views and opinions of pre-primary teachers about their understanding and integration of play-based learning in the pre-primary contexts in Bangladesh. They did not consider children's views about plays of their choice or other matters pertinent to it. Stoffers (2010) had studied the role of Karate to promote gender equality. She interviewed girl students and their teachers and parents in Bangladesh. Chatterjee (2018) discusses findings from a six-country (including Nepal and India) research project implemented by the International Play Association (IPA) to enhance understanding of children's play needs in circumstances of conflict, disasters, and everyday hazards. In the research, around 500 children participated across the six research countries. In Pakistan, Karmaliani et al. (2020) saw the link between structured play-based life-skills intervention in schools in Hyderabad, Pakistan, peer violence (victimization and perpetration), and depression among school children. The context of each study included in this research on children's play was different. All four studies have taken into account children's perspectives on matters of concern to researchers.

## *Analysis*

This paper considers all data, whether from the point of view of children or adults. Studies were analyzed using both deductive and inductive approaches. In the deductive approach, a priori framework for coding the new information was based on spatial, temporal, and psychological factors impacting opportunities to play (Russell, 2006), and also general measures of implementation that include policies, laws, allocations of funds, provision/arrangement studies discovering factors influencing children's play experiences.

This SLR applies the children's right to play framework to uncover studies focusing on measures taken by the governments in South Asia to promote the culture of play as per Article 31 and the GC17 of the Committee. Within the framework of analysis, challenges and specific conditions were the main thematic areas, which were used as lenses for analysis.

Table 1 shows that a few studies are focusing on children's right to play in South Asia. These studies have not touched upon general measures of implementation that were necessary to address challenges and arrange specific conditions to ensure that all children in homes, schools, and communities have access to play and the relevant materials and freedom. South Asia is home to many children; however, academic interests on children's right to play are relatively absent.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to learn the measures the countries in South Asia have taken to implement the right to play Article 31 of the UNCRC. The findings show a sheer scarcity of academic research that could enlighten the list of measures to address challenges and arrange conditions highlighted in GC17. However, there are non-academic write-ups by NGO workers, and the media persons somehow reveal governments' lack of interest in implementing Article 31 (Apolitical, 2019). However, it does not imply that children in eight South Asian countries do not play. By nature, a child tends to play even when he or she is just one-year-old (Kiser et al., 1986).

Besides the absence of studies on tackling challenges and arranging or ensuring specific conditions - as envisaged in the GC17, there is a sheer absence of studies analyzing factors impacting children's play. These factors may include temporal (i.e., daily routine, permissions, and season), spatial (i.e., equipment, layouts, mobility, level of noise, presence of others, peers, the number of spaces, safety, size of spaces, and type of play available) and psychological (i.e., individuals, peers, adults, and society) (Finney & Atkinson, 2020). In light of this SLR, it could quickly be concluded that children in South Asian countries are not treated fairly in academic discourse, especially for their right to play. Thus, the study suggests that special issues should be dedicated by the journals on children's right to play in South Asia and beyond in other parts of the global south. Moreover, an in-depth study on tackling challenges and arranging specific conditions for children's right to play in light of the GC17 is highly recommended and very much needed at present and also for future improvements on the related policy making.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of included papers.

Author(s) (year)	Country	Participants, sample	Methodological approach	Prime focus	Main findings	General measures of implementation
Stoffers (2010)	Bangladesh	20 girl children in grade nine or ten, aged fourteen to fifteen; six families; eight teachers	Qualitative approach; face-to-face interviews	Investigates how girls experienced a karate sports project in a Bangladeshi locality; sports impact their participation.	This thesis takes into account the importance of policy measures.	It lacked to inform about what Bangladesh has done to implement Article 31, especially what the government has done to empower girls through play in schools, homes, and communities
Chatterjee (2018)	India and Nepal	Girls and boys ages 6 to 18; 40 children participated in each of the research sites	Empirical research used qualitative methods to understand and observe children's play in crises	Enhance understanding of children's play needs in circumstances of conflict, including natural, humanitarian, artificial disasters, and everyday hazards. It also focuses on the importance of time, space, permission, and resources as conditions for play in all circumstances, including crisis.	It also shows that children have the adaptive capacity to manage risks in unsafe and high-risk environments through play. They use play to cope and build resilience.	The article does not highlight how and what the governments have taken measures to implement Article 31
Karmaliani et al. (2020)	Pakistan	1752 grade 6 students (929 from intervention and 823 from control schools) were enrolled in the trial	Quantitative analysis	It aimed to understand the impact of the right-to-play intervention on school-based peer violence (i.e., victimization and perpetration) and depression among schoolchildren	Significant decreases in self-reported peer violence victimization, perpetration, and depression.	It lacked to inform about policy measures and available play related infrastructure in schools and communities
Cross and Islam (2021)	Bangladesh	Six teachers	A qualitative approach; used semi-structured interviews to probe participants about their teaching-learning experiences	Examine the role of play-based learning in pre-primary education in Bangladesh	In pre-primary education, many children did not have access to play materials	It insignificantly indicated the recognition of the play, but in pre-primary education; it lacked to inform about the measures taken by the government



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