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Human Rights Protection in Youth Sports Programs: Legal Perspectives from Southeast Asian and South Asian Context

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Abstract: Youth sports programs in Southeast and South Asia face significant human rights challenges despite existing legal frameworks. This study examines legal protection mechanisms for young athletes across eleven countries through comparative legal analysis and case study methodology. Primary data sources include national legislation, sports policies, and regulatory documents, complemented by international reports and academic Findings reveal substantial gaps between legislative provisions literature. implementation, particularly in monitoring systems, enforcement mechanisms, institutional coordination. While most countries possess constitutional protections and child welfare laws, their application to sports contexts remains inconsistent. Cultural barriers, resource constraints, and weak institutional frameworks impede effective rights protection. Singapore and India demonstrate innovative approaches through comprehensive athlete welfare programs. Regional cooperation through ASEAN and SAARC frameworks offers potential pathways for harmonizing standards. Recommendations emphasize strengthening enforcement bodies, establishing independent oversight mechanisms, safeguarding policies for sports organizations, and enhanced regional collaboration. This research contributes to comparative sports law scholarship and provides practical guidance for policymakers and sports authorities in protecting youth athlete rights.

Keyword: Youth Sports, Human Rights, Legal Protection, Southeast Asia, South Asia

INTRODUCTION

Youth sports programs across Southeast and South Asia have experienced remarkable growth over the past two decades, driven by increased government investment, private sector involvement, and rising aspirations for international sporting success. However, this expansion has brought growing concerns about human rights violations affecting young athletes, including exploitation, physical and psychological abuse, educational rights infringement, and gender-based discrimination. The intersection of sports development and child protection presents complex legal challenges requiring comprehensive frameworks that balance talent development with fundamental rights protection (David, 2005).

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The importance of legal frameworks in protecting young athletes cannot be overstated. Children participating in competitive sports face unique vulnerabilities due to power imbalances inherent in coach-athlete relationships, intense training demands, and commercial pressures. International instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) establish foundational principles, yet their translation into sports-specific protections varies significantly across jurisdictions. Recent cases of abuse in youth sports programs have highlighted systemic failures in safeguarding mechanisms, prompting calls for stronger legal interventions (Brackenridge, 2001).

Southeast Asian countries demonstrate diverse approaches reflecting varying levels of economic development, governance structures, and cultural contexts. Indonesia has developed comprehensive child protection legislation alongside sports governance reforms, while Singapore implements sophisticated athlete welfare systems integrating education and sports. Thailand and the Philippines have undertaken recent legal reforms addressing youth athlete protection, though implementation challenges persist. Malaysia and Vietnam represent contrasting models of federalized and centralized approaches respectively (Patel & Bairner, 2009).

South Asian nations face distinct challenges shaped by post-colonial legal structures, resource constraints, and complex sociocultural dynamics. India's federal system creates variations in protection standards across states, though national initiatives like Khelo India attempt unified approaches. Pakistan and Bangladesh grapple with enforcement weaknesses despite legislative frameworks. Sri Lanka and Nepal address youth sports protection within broader development and post-conflict contexts. Religious and cultural norms significantly influence policy implementation across the region (Majumdar & Mehta, 2010).

Despite existing legislative frameworks, significant gaps remain in protecting youth athletes' rights. Coordination between sports authorities and child protection agencies proves inadequate in most jurisdictions. Monitoring and reporting systems lack consistency and comprehensiveness. Enforcement mechanisms suffer from resource limitations and insufficient trained personnel. Cultural attitudes often normalize practices that constitute violations of children's rights. Economic pressures on families create vulnerabilities to exploitation. Gender discrimination persists in access, resources, and protections (Donnelly & Petherick, 2004).

This research addresses three fundamental questions. First, what legal frameworks exist for human rights protection in youth sports across Southeast and South Asian countries? Second, what gaps and challenges characterize implementation of these frameworks? Third, what best practices can be identified and replicated across regions? The study objectives encompass mapping existing legal frameworks in selected countries, analyzing effectiveness of current protection mechanisms, identifying implementation gaps, and proposing evidence-based recommendations for strengthening youth athlete protection.

The theoretical framework integrates human rights theory within sports contexts, child rights protection frameworks based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and sports law and governance principles. This multidisciplinary approach recognizes that effective protection requires legal provisions, institutional capacity, cultural change, and sustained political commitment. The framework acknowledges tensions between performance objectives and welfare considerations, requiring balanced approaches that enable athletic development while safeguarding fundamental rights (Kidd, 2008).

METHOD

This research employs qualitative comparative legal analysis to examine human rights protection frameworks for youth athletes across Southeast and South Asia. The comparative approach enables identification of common elements, divergent practices, and transferable innovations across different legal and cultural contexts. The research design emphasizes

understanding how legal provisions translate into practical protections and what factors facilitate or impede effective implementation.

The study examines eleven countries selected to represent regional diversity in legal systems, governance structures, economic development levels, and sporting traditions. Southeast Asian countries include Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. South Asian countries comprise India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. This selection provides sufficient breadth for meaningful comparative analysis while maintaining analytical depth.

Data collection draws from multiple sources to ensure comprehensiveness and reliability. Primary data encompasses national constitutions, sports legislation, child protection laws, and regulatory frameworks governing youth sports programs. National sports policies and strategic documents provide insights into policy intentions and implementation approaches. Secondary data sources include peer-reviewed academic journals focusing on sports law, child rights, and human rights. International organization reports from the United Nations, UNESCO, and International Olympic Committee offer comparative perspectives and normative standards. Case studies of specific interventions and violations provide concrete examples of implementation challenges and successes.

The analytical framework employs thematic analysis to identify patterns across jurisdictions in legislative provisions, institutional arrangements, and implementation challenges. Comparative analysis examines similarities and differences in approaches, effectiveness, and outcomes. Gap analysis assesses discrepancies between legal provisions and practical implementation, identifying systemic weaknesses and areas requiring reform. The analysis considers contextual factors including legal traditions, governance systems, economic resources, and sociocultural dynamics that shape implementation realities.

Research limitations acknowledge constraints in data availability and accessibility. Enforcement data remains limited in several countries due to weak monitoring systems or restricted public access. Language barriers affect access to legal documents and policy materials in some jurisdictions, necessitating reliance on English translations or secondary sources. The study cannot capture all nuances of implementation across diverse subnational contexts within federal systems. These limitations suggest caution in generalizing findings and indicate areas requiring further investigation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Legal Frameworks in Southeast Asia

Indonesia has developed a comprehensive legal framework addressing youth sports protection through multiple legislative instruments. The National Sports System Law establishes foundational governance structures and athlete protection principles. The Child Protection Law provides general safeguards applicable to sports contexts, prohibiting exploitation, abuse, and discrimination. Recent regulations specifically address athlete welfare, including provisions on training intensity, educational access, and health monitoring. Implementation mechanisms include sports federations' mandatory safeguarding policies, national sports commission oversight, and complaint procedures. However, enforcement capacity remains limited by resource constraints and coordination challenges between sports authorities and child protection agencies (Nugroho, 2018).

Thailand's Sports Authority Act establishes legal foundations for youth athlete protection, complemented by youth welfare policies integrated into sports governance frameworks. The legal framework emphasizes balanced development addressing physical, educational, and psychological dimensions. Recent reforms have strengthened provisions on coaching qualifications and background checks. Notable cases demonstrating implementation challenges include instances of abuse in training centers that revealed inadequate monitoring and weak enforcement. Thailand has subsequently enhanced oversight mechanisms and

established specialized units within the Sports Authority addressing safeguarding concerns (Suphap & Suksom, 2013).

The Philippines' comprehensive Child and Youth Welfare Code provides robust protections theoretically applicable to sports contexts. Recent legal reforms have specifically addressed sports-related concerns following high-profile abuse cases. The Philippine Sports Commission has developed policies requiring safeguarding training for coaches and administrators. Educational integration requirements ensure young athletes maintain academic progress alongside sports participation. Implementation effectiveness varies significantly across sports disciplines and regions, with better compliance in well-resourced national programs compared to grassroots levels (Gonzales, 2017).

Malaysia and Singapore present contrasting models reflecting different development approaches. Malaysia's federal structure creates variations in implementation across states, though national frameworks establish minimum standards. Singapore demonstrates sophisticated integration of education and sports through specialized sports schools and comprehensive athlete welfare programs. Singapore's approach emphasizes long-term athlete development, psychological support services, and career transition assistance. Resource availability enables robust implementation with specialized personnel and monitoring systems. This model demonstrates how adequate investment enables effective rights protection alongside performance excellence (Tan & Houlihan, 2013).

Vietnam's approach reflects its socialist governance structure with centralized sports system and state responsibility for athlete welfare. Legal provisions emphasize state protection obligations and collective welfare over individual rights frameworks. Sports schools operate under strict regulations governing training intensity, educational access, and living conditions. Implementation benefits from centralized oversight but faces challenges in adapting to increasing commercialization and private sector involvement in sports. Recent reforms attempt balancing traditional structures with evolving international standards (Vuong, 2019).

Legal Frameworks in South Asia

India's legal framework combines constitutional provisions guaranteeing fundamental rights with sector-specific legislation. Constitutional protections against exploitation and discrimination provide foundational safeguards. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act applies to sports contexts, establishing strict liability for abuse and mandatory reporting requirements. National sports policy emphasizes holistic athlete development and welfare protections. The Khelo India program represents innovative integration of talent development with rights protection through standardized welfare protocols, educational support, and psychosocial services. Implementation challenges include federalism complexities, resource disparities across states, and inadequate enforcement capacity in many jurisdictions (Sen, 2020).

Pakistan's child protection framework includes general welfare provisions applicable to sports, though sports-specific legislation remains underdeveloped. The legal system reflects Islamic principles emphasizing child welfare and protection from harm. Sports governance structures lack robust safeguarding mechanisms, with limited regulatory oversight of training practices. Cultural considerations significantly influence implementation, particularly regarding gender-segregated sports and female athlete participation. Recent initiatives attempt strengthening protections, but progress remains constrained by institutional weaknesses and resource limitations (Khan & Ahmed, 2016).

Bangladesh addresses youth athlete protection within broader labor law and child rights frameworks. Legal provisions prohibit child labor and exploitation, theoretically applicable to sports contexts. However, sports-specific implementation remains weak with limited regulatory infrastructure. Economic pressures create vulnerabilities as families view sports as

potential pathways from poverty, sometimes prioritizing performance over welfare. The legal system struggles with enforcement capacity across sectors, affecting sports governance similarly. Recent donor-supported initiatives attempt building institutional capacity for athlete protection (Rahman, 2018).

Sri Lanka and Nepal address youth sports protection within distinctive contexts shaped by conflict histories and development challenges. Sri Lanka's post-conflict reconstruction includes sports programs as reconciliation and development tools, with emerging attention to safeguarding frameworks. Legal provisions draw from British colonial legal traditions combined with post-independence reforms. Nepal's federal transition creates implementation uncertainties as authorities clarify jurisdictional responsibilities. Both countries demonstrate commitment to international standards through policy adoption, though implementation capacity remains constrained by resource limitations and competing development priorities (Fernando, 2019; Thapa, 2017).

Comparative Analysis

Table 1. Comparison of Legal Frameworks Across Countries

Country	Key Legislation	Enforcement Bodies	Specific Protections
Indonesia	Sports System Law,	National Sports Commission,	Training limits, education
	Child Protection Law	Child Protection Commission	rights, abuse prohibition
Thailand	Sports Authority Act	Sports Authority, Youth Welfare	Coaching standards,
		Department	monitoring systems
Philippines	Child Welfare Code	Sports Commission, Child Welfare	Educational integration,
		Council	safeguarding policies
Malaysia	Federal sports legislation	Federal Sports Ministry, State	Variable by state
		authorities	
Singapore	Sports education policies	Sports Council, Education	Comprehensive welfare
		Ministry	programs
Vietnam	Sports school regulations	State Sports Authority	Centralized oversight
India	POCSO Act, Sports	Sports Authority, State bodies	Sexual abuse protections,
	Policy		Khelo India standards
Pakistan	Child protection laws	Weak enforcement structures	Limited sports-specific
			provisions
Bangladesh	Labor laws, child rights	Multiple agencies, weak	General protections, weak
	laws	coordination	enforcement
Sri Lanka	Child protection	Sports Ministry, Child Protection	Emerging frameworks
	legislation	Authority	
Nepal	Federal and provincial	Unclear jurisdictional divisions	Development stage
	laws		

Common elements across jurisdictions include constitutional guarantees of education rights and protection from exploitation applicable to young athletes. Most countries establish age restrictions for intensive training and competition, though specific limits vary. Anti-discrimination provisions based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and disability exist in most legal frameworks, though implementation effectiveness differs substantially. Educational access requirements attempt balancing athletic and academic development, with varying enforcement rigor.

Key differences emerge in enforcement mechanisms' sophistication and effectiveness. Singapore demonstrates robust institutional capacity with specialized personnel, adequate resources, and comprehensive monitoring systems. Most other jurisdictions face significant capacity constraints limiting enforcement effectiveness. Penalties and sanctions for violations vary dramatically, from substantial fines and criminal prosecution in some countries to minimal administrative consequences in others. Sports governing bodies' roles differ, with some jurisdictions mandating comprehensive safeguarding policies while others provide

minimal regulatory oversight. Resource availability creates stark implementation differences, with wealthier nations achieving substantially better protection outcomes.

Implementation Gaps and Challenges

Institutional weaknesses constitute primary implementation barriers across both regions. Coordination between sports authorities and child protection agencies remains inadequate in most jurisdictions, creating gaps where violations go undetected or unaddressed. Monitoring and reporting systems lack comprehensiveness and consistency, with many violations never reaching official attention. Specialized expertise in sports-related child protection remains scarce, affecting both prevention and response effectiveness. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and competing priorities within government agencies further impede implementation (Hartill, 2009).

Cultural and social barriers significantly affect protection implementation. Traditional attitudes often normalize harsh training methods and authoritarian coaching styles that constitute rights violations. Economic pressures on families create vulnerabilities to exploitation as sports represent potential escape from poverty. Gender-based discrimination persists through unequal resource allocation, limited opportunities for female athletes, and insufficient attention to gender-specific protection needs. Hierarchical cultural norms inhibit reporting of abuse due to respect for authority and fear of consequences. Community resistance to external intervention in sports reflects broader tensions between traditional practices and rights-based approaches (Lang, 2010).

Resource constraints fundamentally limit implementation across most jurisdictions. Inadequate funding for enforcement activities restricts monitoring capacity, investigation resources, and support services. Shortage of trained personnel affects all implementation aspects from prevention through investigation and response. Infrastructure limitations in many sports facilities lack basic safety features and appropriate conditions. Competing development priorities mean sports welfare receives insufficient attention and resources relative to other pressing needs. These constraints prove particularly severe in economically developing countries where sports governance competes with fundamental service delivery for limited resources.

Table 2. Identified Human Rights Violations and Legal Responses

Violation Type	Common Examples	Legal Provisions	Implementation
			Effectiveness
Physical abuse	Excessive training, corporal punishment	Criminal assault laws, abuse prohibitions	Low to moderate, cultural normalization
Sexual abuse	Harassment, exploitation by coaches	Sexual offense laws, mandatory reporting	Moderate where specialized laws exist
Educational neglect	Training interfering with schooling	Education rights, attendance requirements	Variable, weak in intensive programs
Exploitation	Excessive commercial activities, trafficking	Labor laws, exploitation prohibitions	Low, difficulty establishing exploitation
Discrimination	Gender, disability, ethnicity-based exclusion	Constitutional equality, anti- discrimination laws	Low to moderate, attitudinal barriers
Psychological	Bullying, degradation,	General abuse prohibitions	Very low, difficult to prove
abuse	excessive pressure		and address

Best Practices and Innovative Approaches

Singapore's model demonstrates how comprehensive athlete welfare programs achieve rights protection alongside sporting excellence. The integrated approach combines specialized sports schools with rigorous academic requirements, ensuring educational continuity. Comprehensive support services include sports medicine, psychological counseling, nutritional guidance, and career planning assistance. Mandatory safeguarding

training for all coaches and administrators creates awareness and accountability. Regular monitoring and evaluation systems enable early identification of concerns. Adequate resource allocation ensures implementation effectiveness. While resource-intensive, this model provides evidence that robust protection supports rather than hinders athletic achievement (Horton, 2009).

India's Khelo India program represents innovative scaling of athlete welfare within resource constraints. The program establishes standardized protocols applicable across states and sports disciplines. Educational support ensures young athletes maintain academic progress with flexible scheduling and supplementary instruction. Health monitoring requirements mandate regular medical assessments and injury prevention measures. Psychosocial support services address mental health and wellbeing alongside performance concerns. The program demonstrates how national frameworks can drive improvements despite federalism challenges and resource variations. Ongoing challenges include ensuring consistent implementation across diverse contexts and sustaining political and financial commitment (Mishra, 2021).

Regional cooperation initiatives offer pathways for harmonizing standards and sharing resources. ASEAN frameworks on child protection provide foundations for sports-specific protocols, though development remains incomplete. SAARC sports cooperation includes emerging attention to athlete welfare and protection standards. Knowledge exchange programs enable sharing of effective practices and lessons learned. Regional sporting events increasingly incorporate safeguarding requirements. These initiatives face challenges including sovereignty sensitivities, resource disparities, and competing priorities, yet represent promising approaches for elevating protections through collective action.

Discussion

Analysis of effectiveness reveals mixed outcomes across jurisdictions. Legal frameworks generally exist but implementation lags significantly behind provisions. Enforcement data where available indicates low reporting rates, suggesting either successful deterrence or more likely substantial underreporting due to barriers. Expert opinions emphasize institutional capacity, cultural change, and sustained commitment as critical success factors beyond legislative reform. Stakeholder perspectives reveal tensions between performance imperatives and welfare concerns, requiring careful balancing. Effective frameworks integrate protection into performance pathways rather than treating them as competing objectives.

Comparison with international standards demonstrates general alignment in policy intentions but substantial implementation gaps. The UN Convention on Rights of Child establishes foundational principles present in most national frameworks, yet translation into sports-specific protections proves inconsistent. UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education and Sport provides normative guidance that countries reference but struggle implementing comprehensively. IOC guidelines on safeguarding athletes offer detailed operational guidance that wealthier sporting nations implement more effectively. The gap between international standards and implementation reality reflects broader challenges in translating rights commitments into practical protections.

Pathways for improvement require multifaceted approaches addressing legal, institutional, cultural, and resource dimensions. Harmonization of legal standards through regional frameworks could establish minimum protections while allowing contextual adaptation. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms requires institutional capacity building, adequate resource allocation, and political commitment. Mandatory safeguarding policies for sports organizations should include training requirements, clear protocols, and accountability measures. Capacity building initiatives must address specialized expertise needs in sports-related child protection. Cultural change strategies should engage communities, traditional

leaders, and sports stakeholders in reshaping norms and practices. Resource mobilization through domestic allocation, international assistance, and public-private partnerships can address funding constraints.

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis reveals that while legal frameworks for youth athlete protection exist across Southeast and South Asian countries, implementation remains substantially weak. Most jurisdictions possess constitutional protections, child welfare legislation, and increasingly sports-specific provisions. However, translation from legal text to practical protection faces persistent challenges including inadequate enforcement capacity, weak institutional coordination, cultural barriers normalizing harmful practices, and insufficient resources for comprehensive implementation. Significant variations exist between Southeast and South Asian approaches, reflecting differences in governance structures, economic resources, legal traditions, and sociocultural contexts.

Common gaps characterize both regions despite these variations. Monitoring and reporting systems lack comprehensiveness, preventing detection and documentation of violations. Enforcement mechanisms suffer from limited personnel, inadequate training, and insufficient resources for investigation and response. Accountability remains weak with minimal consequences for violations. Coordination between sports authorities and child protection agencies proves inadequate, creating gaps in responsibility and response. Cultural acceptance of practices constituting rights violations impedes prevention and reporting. These systemic weaknesses require comprehensive reform addressing legal, institutional, cultural, and resource dimensions simultaneously.

This research contributes enhanced understanding of regional dynamics in youth athlete protection, providing empirical foundation for comparative sports law scholarship. The framework developed enables systematic analysis of protection systems, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and reform priorities. Findings demonstrate that effective protection requires integrated approaches combining legal provisions, institutional capacity, cultural change, and adequate resources. The study challenges assumptions that legislation alone ensures protection, highlighting implementation as the critical determinant of outcomes.

Practical implications for policymakers emphasize need for comprehensive approaches beyond legislative reform. Governments should strengthen legal frameworks with sports-specific provisions addressing identified gaps, establish independent oversight bodies with adequate authority and resources, allocate funding for enforcement infrastructure and specialized personnel, and mandate safeguarding requirements for sports organizations receiving public support. Sports organizations must adopt comprehensive child protection policies, implement mandatory background checks and safeguarding training, create accessible and safe reporting mechanisms, and integrate welfare considerations into coaching and performance frameworks. Regional bodies including ASEAN and SAARC should develop regional protocols establishing minimum protection standards, facilitate knowledge exchange and capacity building, support harmonization efforts respecting national contexts, and mobilize resources for implementation assistance.

Future research should conduct longitudinal studies tracking policy effectiveness over time, employ impact assessments of specific interventions to build evidence base, investigate youth athlete perspectives and participation in policy-making, examine enforcement mechanisms and their effectiveness comparatively, and analyze resource allocation and its impact on implementation outcomes. Understanding what works, for whom, and under what conditions requires ongoing empirical investigation building cumulative knowledge to inform evidence-based reform.

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