

# South Asian women fight for rights in Canada: No equality without child care, immigrant women say <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

As a child, Shuvra Sen showed such scholastic promise that her village in rural Bangladesh took up a collection to send her to university.

As the first person from her area to attend post-secondary education, Sen studied in earnest to make her village proud.

And after earning a master's degree in management accounting and working for 14 years, Sen immigrated to Canada with her husband and young son.

But five years later, the 40-year-old accountant is pent up in a highrise apartment in east Toronto's Teesdale/Crescent Town neighbourhood with her son, now 10, and a daughter, 5, while her husband works.

"I can't imagine how the villagers back home would feel if they knew how their investment in her is being wasted here in Canada," says Sultana Jahangir, 39, Sen's neighbour and founder of the South Asian Women's Rights Organization.

With more than 600 children in the area waiting for child-care subsidies, and a local public school that won't offer all-day kindergarten this fall or next, Sen is stuck. She can't attend classes to improve her English, update her foreign credentials, or look for work.

Jahangir, a Bangladeshi woman who immigrated to the area via New York in 2006, says the four apartment towers of Teesdale Place, near Danforth Ave. and Victoria Park, are filled with women like Sen. Half have been in Canada for five years or less. Few are working, and most blame the lack of child care for that.

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The group held its first public meeting in the fall of 2007. In early 2008, it became a registered non-profit organization. In its first year, with \$750 in seed money from COSTI immigrant services and a small grant from the Freedonia Foundation, the group ran 40 workshops on settlement services, each attended by about 50 women.

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By 2009, the women had raised about \$60,000 from the United Way and several other foundations and began renting office space on the main floor of Jahangir's apartment building. In the winter and spring of that year, they knocked on 1,200 doors and interviewed 400 women about their experience in Canada. They found that 80 per cent of the women had university degrees, and most were angry about the lack of child care.

They rented buses to protest at provincial poverty-reduction forums and federal standing committee hearings. And they wrote letters, signed petitions and met with area politicians to demand action.

"Women are coming here, sitting in the house with university degrees, looking after their kids," Jahangir says. "After 10 to 12 years at home, they still can't speak English, their children are struggling and they are living in poverty."

Longtime community activist Uzma Shakir has watched with awe and excitement as Jahangir and her group have burst onto the local political stage.

"These women make me feel alive again. It's politics old-style. This is passion. This is caring. And Sultana has made it happen," Shakir says.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

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