

OPEN SOCIETY
JUSTICE INITIATIVE

DISPLACEMENT BY DESIGN

Resisting Denmark's Race-based Housing Laws



Acknowledgments

This report was written by Tobias Birk Gregory, and Susheela Math and Dan Guinigundo of the Open Society Justice Initiative, based on interviews undertaken by Tobias Birk Gregory and Britta My Thomsen. It has also benefited from the assistance of the Justice Initiative's Nina Ippolito. Photography by Britta My Thomsen.

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Together with its partners, Rosenberg Khawaja Law Firm, Almen Modstand, and the Centre for Muslims' Rights in Denmark, the Open Society Justice Initiative has been challenging measures taken under the "Ghetto Package" since 2018.



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“We had a wonderful time in Mjølnerparken, got to know many people over the years, learned of other cultures and worldviews. We still cannot believe how we have been treated by the authorities.”

Janni Milstead



INTRODUCTION

This is the story of people—lawful residents—being forced to leave their homes because of government policies shaped by racial discrimination. It is told in their own words. It is the story of an injustice that must not be repeated.

In March 2018, the Danish government announced a bundle of over 20 different legislative proposals affecting spheres of life as diverse as housing, education, and criminal justice.¹ The Danish government dubbed this legislation the “Ghetto Package,” and its stated aim was to eradicate by the year 2030 areas officially designated as “ghettos.”



The determining factor in the designation of an area as a “ghetto” is whether the majority of residents are classed as being of “non-Western” background.² This “non-Western” label can cover generations of individuals, including “descendants” born in Denmark.³ But immigrants (and their children) from Australia and New Zealand are excluded from the concept of “non-Western,” demonstrating that despite its name the categorization is not based on geography.⁴

The government’s stated goal of eradicating ghettos is to eliminate “parallel societies.”⁵ Such societies were said by the government to arise as a result of people holding “norms” and religious values that are different from those of the Danish majority.⁶ The majority populations in Denmark are white and

Christian.⁷ Three UN human rights experts have found that “in effect, ‘non-Western’ is a term that disproportionately attaches to Denmark’s mainly non-European racial, ethnic, religious, and non-White populations, including persons descended or originating from Muslim-majority countries.”⁸ The political and legal rhetoric around “ghettos” and people of “non-Western” background is replete with generalizations, assumptions, and stereotypes, including that “ghettos” are places where “women are considered less worthy than men,”⁹ and which must be “eradicated” in order for “Denmark to continue to be Denmark.”¹⁰

The “non-Western” classification has already been condemned by numerous international and regional human rights treaty bodies as

racially discriminatory and marginalizing.¹¹ Nonetheless, successive Danish governments have forged ahead with implementing the “Ghetto Package,” with devastating impacts throughout Denmark.

A key feature of the legislation is a legal requirement to reduce “common family housing” in “tough ghettos” (areas which have already met the criteria of a “ghetto” for five years) to a maximum of 40 percent by the year 2030.¹² “Common housing” is not social housing but rather a particularly Danish form of not-for-profit housing based on principles of democracy, egalitarianism, and affordable housing for all. Residents pay rent to self-governing, independent housing associations, with funds being used for matters such as social projects for children.

Such a reduction can be made through intrusive means such as sale or demolition, leading to thousands of people across Denmark facing, or having already faced, eviction. One affected area is Mjølnerparken, Copenhagen, situated within “the world’s coolest neighbourhood.”¹³

There, two buildings containing over 200 homes—some of which have been family dwellings for decades—have already been sold pursuant to a “Ghetto Package” development plan sanctioned by the government.

Despite three strands of ongoing litigation and an urgent appeal from three United Nations Special Rapporteurs asking for building sales to be halted pending resolution of the case, the sale of the two Mjølnerparken buildings has proceeded and all residents within the two blocks have received eviction notices.

This report is a glimpse into the stories of some of those residents, told in their own voices. Faced with years of uncertainty and relentless pressure to move, most residents have had to relinquish their homes under protest. Many have been forced to accept smaller or more expensive housing. The majority have experienced great distress, and for some who are former refugees, re-traumatisation. For all of these residents, however, one thing is certain: nothing will ever be the same.

Mjølnerparken in Context

Built in the mid-1980s on the grounds of a former paper mill in Copenhagen’s northern district of Nørrebro, Mjølnerparken was a complex comprising four blocks of four-story red brick apartment buildings with balconies looking over tree-lined courtyards. In total it featured 560 homes hosting around 1,600 people made up of individuals, couples, families, students and retirees of all ages and backgrounds. Nørrebro, a former working-class district, was declared *Time* magazine’s “world’s coolest neighborhood” in 2022.



Mjølnerparken was an example of ‘common housing’ which is run by independent, non-profit housing associations, subject to rent control. Its housing included what was Denmark’s oldest “senior collective”—a community living project for retirees.

Considered a central pillar in Danish society, this kind of affordable housing arrangement represents around 20 percent of the national housing stock and provides homes for nearly one million people. The boards of the associations are constituted by tenant representatives, who ordinarily have a say over control over budgets, rents, refurbishments and general maintenance issues.



MAJKEN FELLE

“It worries me how effectively politicians have embedded a narrative that makes it okay to discriminate against minorities. To me, it is unquestionable to fight alongside my community to defend the rights of all—because what rights will be the next to go, if we allow the ghetto legislation to remain unchallenged?”

I moved to Mjølnerparken in 2014 after living in other “hipster” and “upscale” neighborhoods in Copenhagen. Mjølnerparken was by far the nicest. From my apartment I could hear the happy sounds of children playing in the courtyard, as the adults drank coffee and greeted each other. There was such a sense of community and togetherness, and I felt at home and safe in a way that I hadn’t encountered before. Our community was welcoming, diverse, and hardworking—a Danish success story.

And then it was announced that our homes were going to be sold because we were a “ghetto.” It spread shock and fear throughout the community. We knew that whatever happened, whether we won or lost, we would resist and make it clear that none of this was happening with our blessing. We convened weekly coffee evenings to answer residents’ questions, exchange ideas, and arrange the paperwork for those interested in challenging the government.

It’s quite clear who the legislation is targeting and it’s not me, although I am affected too. I have been forcibly relocated and I have lost my neighbors, who I miss. Our community doesn’t exist anymore. Nobody should have their rights taken away from them and certainly not because of religion, ethnicity, lifestyle, or gender.

JANNI MILSTED & JOHN CHRISTOFFERSEN

JANNI

I lived in Mjølnerparken for 15 years as a member of what used to be the oldest “senior collective” living project in Denmark. Mjølnerparken had shared community space for the seniors and a community house for all residents. There were gymnastics classes, powerwalks, dinner clubs, and whether it was Eid, Christmas, or graduation day, we always made sure to involve ourselves in the activities. There was a great sense of friendship and security. That all came to a halt when we were forced out. People were terribly sad.

Politicians and media talk so much about loneliness, yet they split up our community [even after] having been promised that the seniors would be rehoused together. I am concerned that others feel very lonely and isolated since they were moved.

JOHN

I spent four years as a member of the senior collective at Mjølnerparken before we were forced out of our home in late 2023. It was a great way to share and socialize. If you wanted to have a chat, go to a restaurant or see a movie, your neighbors were just a knock away.

Then the redevelopment and sale began. We fought tirelessly to be heard, to no avail, and continue to fight for our former community.





LISBETH SAUGMANN & HANNAH PAWL

“I thought that moving to Mjølnerparken was where I would grow old and never leave. I wasn’t lonely as there was a generous community to assist me, and vice versa.”

Hannah Pawl

HANNAH

In Mjølnerparken I felt safe, I felt at home. You were never alone and could always go to the community shared space and someone would likely greet you. For Lisbeth and me, speaking to each other from our balconies over a morning cup of coffee became part of our daily routine.

It gave us a sense of belonging—something you do not easily find elsewhere. In our new place, I have a roof and walls, but not a home. Home is something created over time, in a community where I feel safe.

LISBETH

I feel dehumanised by being forced out of my home. The fact they we have been robbed of our right to choose, and filled with false promises, forcing our senior community to split, is degrading.

We have been the targets of demonizing political narratives that have portrayed us as living in unsafe, so-called “parallel societies”. But people here go to work, they go to school, and more. It is racism that seeks to spark a feud of “us” and “them.”



MEDIHA FOCAK & HODAN MOHAMMED

“Being confronted with eviction made me feel like a refugee and a target. I felt like I was on the run once more. It felt like war all over again.”

Hodan Mohammed

MEDIHA

Me and my neighbor Hodan used to live next to each other in Mjølnerparken—being mothers brought us together. We started talking, lending a cup of sugar and so on. Our children played together. When I was working evening shifts, Hodan made sure my boys got fed, did their homework, and got to bed on time. It was always about what we share with our neighbors that made this my home.

Being in Mjølnerparken was not just about having a roof over our heads, it was about feeling safe in our homes. They took that away from us. When the housing association knocked on my door to serve me the eviction notice, I felt like the child I was when war broke out in Bosnia. Back then my mother stood in the door, shielding me from soldiers who had come with the intent to kill. Even though they were serving me with papers, it felt like having a gun pointed at me all over again, with nowhere to turn. We are stigmatized as well as our children, even though they are born and raised in Denmark.

They didn't think anyone would care or fight back against this legislation. But this is our home and I'm proud to say that we stood our ground.

HODAN

One time I got sick and was hospitalized and all I could think of was: “Who will care for my children?” We didn't know each other very well at the time but Mediha jumped to help. She says, “That's what neighbors do.”

I cried when we got the news that we had to leave. I don't eat, I don't sleep. Being confronted with eviction made me feel like a refugee again, and a target. I felt like I was on the run once more. It felt like fleeing from the war in Somalia all over again.

MEHMED FOCAK

“I have to work twice as hard to prove that I am of equal worth as someone who has a more native Danish name or look.”

We have lived here for the past 24 years and now we are told to go somewhere else. I lost my dad 13 years ago and this place holds my memories of him. We will be rehoused but not in the same apartment and not with the same neighbors. We were relocated a number of times because of the renovation works in Mjølnerparken.

The “ghetto legislation” is not fair but it is not surprising. I have faced this kind of prejudice many times. Sometimes I have to play along and appease those who are stigmatizing me. I am often stopped by the police, who check my official registration and address, and they are often surprised by my “good Danish” or that I am wearing work clothes. What do they mean by my “good Danish”? I am Danish: I was born and raised in Denmark, I went to a Danish school, I have a Danish passport.



IMAN ALJANABY

“I was born and raised in Denmark, my dad is a doctor, and my mother is in biotech. Sometimes people yell, ‘Go home to your own country!’ In that case I would have to move back to Næstved.”



I grew up in Mjølnerparken and it was a well-functioning community. Never in my life did I hear anything bad from our neighbors or experience a ruckus when night falls. It always felt safe and peaceful. Everyone knew each other and lived in harmony.

The “Ghetto Package” is surreal. It is devastating to be stigmatized and discriminated against in this way in a country which I believed had modern values and freedom of education, in a country where I was and born and raised. No matter what I achieve, I will never be perceived as part of society, but I will remain “non-Western.”

People ask: “Why are you making such a big deal of it? You are just moving out.” I always have the same answer: because I am being forced, it’s not my choice, it’s not a happy occasion.

Why is this happening to us? Why are we being targeted in Mjølnerparken? They’re tearing apart families, friends, and neighbors. The disrespect for human life is appalling and all because of political fearmongering.

Every day I used to ring the bell of my childhood friend from the building across from ours. We were always playing in the courtyard and staying at each other’s homes. We grew up together, shared our community and now this has all been taken away. All that remains is a memory. Mjølnerparken will never be the same.

Mjølnerparken was always accused of being a place where no one spoke Danish and that was hostile to outsiders, which I find hilarious. Sure, many of my neighbors have a Muslim background or speak some variation of Arabic, but the area is still full-on Danish.

A close-up portrait of Muhammad Aslam, a man with a long, grey beard and a grey knit cap. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is blurred, showing some greenery and a building.

MUHAMMAD ASLAM

“I moved to Denmark when I was only seven years old. I never could have imagined that my own country would do this to me. I have four children who were born here, all of whom are professionals: a lawyer, engineer, psychologist, and social worker. No matter how well we do, we will all still be defined by the term “non-Western.” Now we have lost the home that my children were raised in. Nothing can replace our treasured family home, which was full of those special memories. It’s just not the same.”

I moved to Mjølnerparken in 1987 before some of the blocks were even finished. By the time it was fully built, our neighbors were already friends.

Over the years on the residents' board, we arranged great activities, whether it was a summer trip to an attraction, tutoring for school children, or celebrating a holy season, it always brought us together.

What was a thriving neighborhood is now becoming a hostile city planning project made to profit developers. How does doubling the cost of living make a positive impact?

We have become the target of disgraceful injustice. Many of my neighbors no longer have faith in politicians and authorities because of how we are stigmatized and used as scapegoats to harvest votes through fearmongering. I am still dumbfounded by the term "non-Western." My father came to Denmark by invitation from the Danish government and cemented our livelihood here. Half a century later our family is then told that we can no longer be part of this society.

I don't live in a parallel society, and I never have. I live in a country where my family was welcomed and where we chose to be. I practice my beliefs and, until recently, I believed this to be a human right. I hope one day politicians admit that the "non-Western" classification is being used to target my heritage and stigmatize my beliefs. I have lived in Denmark since the age of seven. My children are all born and raised here. We all carry Danish citizenship and provide for our own. But because of my "non-Western" origin, we are all targeted to fuel a negative narrative.

CONCLUSION

According to *Time Out* magazine, “the real draw of Nørrebro is its wide-ranging diversity, bolstered by a generous dose of community spirit.” This view is confirmed by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance’s report on its visit to Mjølnerparken, and indeed by the stories in this report. Yet successive Danish governments have defended their approval of Mjølnerparken’s “Ghetto Package” development plan, fuelled by their ongoing determination to “eradicate” the neighborhood as it is, essentially because it is too “non-Western.”

On September 30, 2024, the Court of Justice of the European Union began consideration of whether the legislation’s definition of “non-Western” background constitutes “ethnic origin” under the EU’s Race Equality Directive and, if so, whether the housing element of the “Ghetto Package” constitutes racial discrimination.

The outcome will potentially shape how racialized groups across the European Union—and those who live alongside them—are treated. Those who have lived through the trauma that unfolded in Mjølnerparken and other affected areas throughout Denmark have taken their stand—in the hope of ensuring that nobody else suffers what they have had to endure.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Danish Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Interior, "Ét Danmark uden parallelsamfund – Ingen ghettoer i 2030" [English: "One Denmark Without Parallel Societies – No Ghettos by 2030"], March 2018 ("Policy Paper"), available at: https://www.regeringen.dk/media/4937/publikation_%C3%A9t-danmark-uden-parallel-samfund.pdf.
- 2 The "Ghetto Package" introduced amendments to the Common Housing Act ("CHA"). Section 61a(1) of the CHA (as amended) defines a "vulnerable housing estate" as an area of "common housing" inhabited by over 1,000 residents where at least two of four socio-economic criteria are met. Section 61a(2) of the CHA (as amended) provides that an area that would otherwise be a "vulnerable housing estate" is defined as a "ghetto" where the share of residents of "non-Western background" exceeds 50%. "Ghettos" have been renamed as "parallel societies" under the 2021 expansion of the law, as set out below.
- 3 "Non-Western" background covers "immigrants" and "descendants." An "immigrant" is defined as a person born abroad, whose parents were foreign citizens or born abroad. A "descendant" is defined as a person born in Denmark, whose parents were immigrants or descendants with foreign citizenship. The above definitions do not apply to an individual categorized as being of "Danish origin," a designation that is applied if at least one parent was born in Denmark and has Danish citizenship. See Statistics Denmark, "Indvandrere i Danmark 2021" available at: <https://www.dst.dk/Site/Dst/Udgivelser/GetPubFile.aspx?id=34714&sid=indv2021>. Being born in Denmark does not automatically lead to Danish citizenship.
- 4 The definition of "Western" by Statistics Denmark is: the Member States of the European Union (including the United Kingdom), Andorra, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, Vatican State, Canada, the United States of America, Australia, and New Zealand. See Statistics Denmark, Statistical Presentation, available at <https://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/dokumentation/documentationofstatistics/immigrants-and-descendants--discontinued-/statistical-presentation#:~:text=Western%2FNon%2Dwestern%20countries%3A,western%20countries%3A%20All%20other%20countries>.
- 5 See page 6 of the Policy Paper for the stated aim.
- 6 Danish Ministry of Economy and Interior, "Parallelsamfund i Danmark", Economic Analysis no. 30, February 2018, page 3.
- 7 Ben Bradford, "A report on the demographic composition of countries defined by the Danish Government as 'Western'," February 2022, p. 8, available at https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/658096f2-b861-4e42-a775-3738e2457ad0/expert-report-dr-ben-bradford-ucl_20231010.pdf.
- 8 Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context; and the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, UA DNK 3/2020, 16 October 2020 ("Urgent Appeal").
- 9 "Ét Danmark uden parallelsamfund – Ingen ghettoer i 2030" [English: "One Denmark Without Parallel Societies – No Ghettos by 2030"], March 2018, p. 5.
- 10 Page 6 of the Policy Paper.
- 11 See Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Concluding observations on sixth periodic report of Denmark, UN Doc. E/C.12/DNK/CO/6, 12 November 2019 ("CESCR"), paras. 51 and 52, available at: <http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=4slQ6QSmIBEDzFEovLCuW71MtEjVgFZjOTx%2Bv7mTUvkKWW%2FfrjBRu8HNzObI%2B-zb87gtYIimVL5%2BjFD6f1L76xMZCYMwTzITb2Jpme6cOwejXBwB%2Bnoj%2FiM2aq3gz1%2BR9>; and Secretariat of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Fifth Opinion on Denmark, Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, ACFC/OP/V(2019)003, 29 January 2020, paras. 14 and 44, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/5th-op-denmark-en/1680996202>. See also Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding observations on the combined twenty-second to twenty-fourth periodic reports of Denmark, UN Doc. CERD/C/DNK/CO/22-24, 1 February 2022, para. 11, available at: <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhstNvdqlswU%2fblKYXnDigeHpVR7vhfmtq2zJgChOQh6pZb%2f2pJ2OvOexajJQHSx-0KvS9jWnPmXM0m4sGBFnnGcDxjRhQbEqWpbbjdB5%2bl41oBxoBmprjgm11GG01NjXPw%3d%3d>; and European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, ECRI Report on Denmark (sixth monitoring cycle), 9 June 2022, page 6, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/6th-ecri-report-on-denmark-/1680a6d5e4>.
- 12 Section 168a of the CHA.
- 13 *Time Out*, "Time Out reveals the World's Coolest Neighbourhoods right now," 6 October 2021, available at: <https://www.timeout.com/about/latest-news/time-out-reveals-the-worlds-coolest-neighbourhoods-right-now-100621>.
- 14 European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, ECRI Report on Denmark (sixth monitoring cycle), 9 June 2022, page 6, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/6th-ecri-report-on-denmark-/1680a6d5e4>.

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