Blending isn't optional

COPENHAGEN

Denmark laws require that immigrants' children enter the mainstream

BY ELLEN BARRY
AND MARTIN SELSOE SORENSEN

When Rokhaia Naassan gives birth in the coming days, she and her baby boy will enter a new category in the eyes of Danish law. Because she lives in a low-income immigrant neighborhood described by the government as a "ghetto," Rokhaia will be what the Danish newspapers call a "ghetto parent" and the baby will be a "ghetto child."

Starting at the age of 1, "ghetto children" must be separated from their families for at least 25 hours a week, not including nap time, for mandatory instruction in "Danish values," including the traditions of Christmas and Easter, and Danish language. Noncompliance could result in a stoppage of welfare payments. Other Danish citizens are free to choose whether to enroll children in preschool up to the age of six.

Denmark's government is introducing a new set of laws to regulate life in 25 low-income and heavily Muslim enclaves, saying that if families there do not willingly merge into the country's mainstream, they should be compelled.

Barwaqo Jama Hussein, 18, a refugee who lives in Tingbjerg, an area labeled a ghetto. "We follow the rules, we go to school. The only thing we don't do is eat pork."

For decades, integrating immigrants has posed a thorny challenge to the Danish model, intended to serve a small, homogeneous population. Leaders are focusing on urban neighborhoods where immigrants, some of them placed there by the government, live in dense concentrations with high rates of unemployment and gang violence.

Politicians' description of the so-called ghettos has become increasingly sinister. In his annual New Year's speech, Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen warned that ghettos could "reach out their tentacles onto the streets" by spreading violence, and that because of ghettos, "cracks have appeared on the map of Denmark." Politicians who once used the word "integration" now call frankly for "assimilation."

That tough approach is embodied in the "ghetto package." Of 22 proposals presented by the government in early March, most have been agreed upon by a parliamentary majority, and more will be subject to a vote in the fall.

Some are punitive: One measure under consideration would allow courts to double the punishment for certain crimes if they are committed in one of the 25 neighborhoods classified as ghettos, based on residents' income, employment status, education levels, number of criminal convictions and "non-Western background." Another would impose a four-year prison sentence on immigrant parents who force their children to make extended visits to their country of origin — described here as "re-education trips" — in that way damaging their "schooling, language and well-being." Another would allow the local authorities to increase their monitoring and surveillance of "ghetto" families.

Some proposals have been rejected as too radical, like one from the far-right Danish People's Party that would confine "ghetto children" to their homes after 8 p.m. (Challenged on how this would be enforced, Martin Henriksen, the chairman of Parliament's integration committee, suggested in earnest that

DENMARK, PAGE 4

WORLD

Denmark requires classes on 'values'

DENMARK, FROM PAGE 1

young people in these areas could be fitted with electronic ankle bracelets.)

At this summer's Folkemodet, an annual political gathering on the island of Bornholm, the justice minister, Soren Pape Poulsen, shrugged off the rights-based objection.

"Some will wail and say, 'We're not equal before the law in this country,' and 'Certain groups are punished harder,' but that's nonsense," he said, adding that the increased penalties would affect only people who break the law.

To those claiming the measures single out Muslims, he said: "That's nonsense and rubbish. To me this is about, no matter who lives in these areas and who they believe in, they have to profess to the values required to have a good life in Denmark."

Yildiz Akdogan, a Social Democrat whose parliamentary constituency includes Tingbjerg, which is classified as a ghetto, said Danes had become so desensitized to harsh rhetoric about immigrants that they no longer register the negative connotation of the word "ghetto" and its echoes of Nazi Germany's separation of Jews.

"We call them 'ghetto children, ghetto parents,' it's so crazy," Ms. Akdogan said. "It is becoming a mainstream word, which is so dangerous. People who know a little about history, our European not-so-nice period, we know what the word 'ghetto' is associated with."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAURICIO LIMA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Rokhaia Naassan, center, back to camera, at a Copenhagen housing project. She resents new laws affecting "ghetto children."

She pulled out her phone to display a Facebook post from a right-wing politician, railing at a Danish supermarket for selling a cake reading "Eid Mubarak," for the Muslim holiday of Eid. "Right now, facts don't matter so much, it's only feelings," she said. "This is the dangerous part of it."

For their part, many residents of Danish "ghettos" say they would move if they could afford to live elsewhere. On a recent afternoon, Ms. Naassan was sitting with her four sisters in Mjolnerparken, a four-story, red brick housing complex that is, by the numbers, one of Denmark's worst ghettos: forty-three percent of its residents are unemployed, 82 percent come from "non-Western backgrounds," 53 percent have scant education and 51 percent have relatively low earnings.

The Naassan sisters wondered aloud why they were subject to these new measures. The children of Lebanese refugees, they speak Danish without an accent and converse with their children in Danish; their children, they complain, speak so little Arabic that they can barely communicate with their grandparents. Years ago, growing up in Jutland, in Denmark's west, they rarely encountered any anti-Muslim feeling, said Sara, 32.

"Maybe this is what they always thought, and now it's out in the open," she said. "Danish politics is just about Muslims now. They want us to get more assimilated or get out. I don't know when they will be satisfied with us."

Rokhaia, her due date fast approaching, flared with anger at the mandatory preschool program announced by the government in May: Already, she said, her daughter was being taught so much about Christmas in kindergarten that she came home begging for presents from Santa Claus.

"Nobody should tell me whether or how my daughter should go to preschool. Or when," she said. "I'd rather lose my benefits than submit to force."

Dorthe Pedersen, center, a hairdresser, and her client Anni Larsen, left. They approve of the new laws for "ghetto" residents.

Barwaqo Jama Hussein, 18, a Somali refugee, noted that many immigrant families, including her own, had been settled in "ghetto" neighborhoods by the government. She moved to Denmark when she was 5 and has lived in the Tingbjerg ghetto area since she was 13. She said the politicians' description of "parallel societies" simply did not fit her, or Tingbjerg.

"It hurts that they don't see us as equal people," she said. "We actually live in Danish society. We follow the rules, we go to school. The only thing we don't do is eat pork."

About 12 miles south of the city, in the middle-class suburb of Greve, though, voters gushed with approval over the new laws.

"They spend too much Danish money," said Dorthe Pedersen, a hairdresser, daubing chestnut dye on a client's hairline. "We pay their rent, their clothing, their food, and then they come in broken Danish and say, 'We can't work because we've got a pain.'"

Her client, Anni Larsen, told a story about being invited by a Turkish immigrant to their child's wedding and being scandalized to discover that the guests were separated by gender and seated in different rooms. "I think there were only 10 people from Denmark," she said, appalled. "If you ask me, I think they shouldn't have invited us."

Anette Jacobsen, 64, a retired pharmacist's assistant, said she so treasured Denmark's welfare system, which had provided her four children with free education and health care, that she felt a surge of gratitude every time she paid her taxes, more than 50 percent of her yearly income. As for immigrants using the system, she said, "There is always a cat door for someone to sneak in."

"Morally, they should be grateful to be allowed into our system, which was built over generations," she said.

Her husband, Jesper, a former merchant sailor whose ship once docked in Lebanon, said he had watched laborers there being shot for laziness and replaced by truckloads of new workers gathered in the countryside.

"I think they are 300 to 400 years behind us," Jesper said.

"Their culture doesn't fit here," Anette said.

The new hard-edge push to force Muslims to integrate struck both of them as positive. "The young people will see what it is to be Danish and they will not be like their parents," Jesper said.

"The grandmothers will die sometime," Anette said. "They are the ones resisting change."

By focusing heavily on the collective cost of supporting refugee and immigrant families, the Danish People's Party has won many voters away from the center-left Social Democrats, who had long been seen as the defenders of the welfare state. With a general election approaching next year, the Social Democrat party has shifted to the right on immigration, saying tougher measures are necessary to protect the welfare state.

Nearly 87 percent of Denmark's 5.7 million people are of Danish descent, with immigrants and their descendants accounting for the rest. Two-thirds of the immigrants, around half a million, are from Muslim backgrounds, a group that swelled with the waves of Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian refugees crossing Europe.

Critics would say "the state cannot force children away from their parents in the daytime, that's disproportionate use of force," said Rune Lykkeberg, the editor in chief of Dagbladet Information, a left-liberal daily newspaper. "But the Social Democrats say, 'We give people money, and we want something for this money.' This is a system of rights and obligations."

Danes have a high level of trust in the state, including as a central shaper of children's ideology and beliefs, he said.

Ms. Hussain, the high school student from Tingbjerg, is accustomed to anti-immigrant talk surging ahead of elections, but says this year it is harsher than she can ever remember.

"If you create new kinds of laws that apply to only one part of society, then you can keep adding to them," she said. "It will turn into the parallel society they're so afraid of. They will create it themselves."

Anna Schaverien contributed reporting from London.