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‘Shadow system’ of Sharia courts challenges E

Conservatives call for regulation to protect vulnerable women

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Louis Goss
Business reporter
06 September 2025 12:00pm BST

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Critics view Sharia councils as a fundamental threat to British values Credit: Penelope Barritt / Shutterstock

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A job posting for a Sharia Law Administrator on the Department for Work and Pensions’ careers board was like a red rag to a bull for Nigel Farage.

To the Reform UK leader, the advert for the £23,500 a year job in the suburb of Didsbury, Manchester, showed “our country and its values are being destroyed.”

The listing itself said any potential candidates should have previous experience in “Shariah law-related fields and/or Shariah courts in Muslim countries,” alongside expertise in British law.

But Farage was not the only politician outraged. Senior Tories also lined up to criticise the posting, which briefly emerged in July before being deleted. Robert Jenrick, the shadow justice secretary, said at the time: “As I’ve said before, sharia courts should be banned. The only laws are the laws of England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It’s as simple as that.”

Ultimately, the job posting turned out to not be for central government but a community organisation advertising using the platform.

SHARIAH LAW ADMINISTRATOR

Posting date:	24 July 2025
Salary:	£23,500 per year
Hours:	Full time
Closing date:	23 August 2025
Location:	Didsbury, Manchester
Remote working:	On-site only
Company:	MANCHESTER COMMUNITY CENTRE
Job type:	Permanent
Job reference:	

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£24,000 to £26,000 per year

The job posting was removed following the criticism

However, the furore shone a light on the network of Sharia law courts that have sprung up across Britain in recent decades to deal with disputes within Muslim communities.

Supporters say they are little more than mediation and religious guidance services that work within British law and are no different to other civil mediation bodies, including Catholic tribunals and the Beth Din rabbinical courts used by Orthodox Jews.

Critics, by contrast, view Sharia councils as a fundamental threat to British values – either by undermining liberal principles or even by working in direct opposition to the UK’s state law.

Maryam Namazie, an Iranian-born human rights campaigner from the One Law for All campaign, says: “The problem with Sharia or any religious court is that it relies on laws perceived as divine, which cannot be challenged or questioned.”

Above all, opponents fear Sharia courts effectively operate as a parallel legal system that diverges from British legal norms.

Tice: ‘Sharia courts have no place in Britain’

Critics cite the fact that, unlike the Beth Din courts used in Jewish communities, the vast majority of Britain’s Sharia councils are not signed up to the Arbitration Act of 1996 – meaning there’s little oversight over the way they operate or recourse for when things go wrong.

Richard Tice, the deputy leader of Reform UK, says: “Sharia courts have no place in Britain. We cannot allow a shadow parallel legal system to develop in this country.”

Britain’s first Sharia law court opened its doors in Leyton, east London, in 1982. The unofficial tribunals offer to resolve disputes in line with Islamic legal principles. The councils that exist in the UK vary in size and scale, from individual scholars to more sophisticated bodies supported by professionals including qualified lawyers.

Dozens now exist across the country, with estimates suggesting there are up to 85 in Britain. The religious courts are mostly used for divorces, often when Muslim women want a “Talaq” certificate that allows them to remarry under Islamic law. These tribunals also deal with inheritance disputes or other civil matters.



The courts are mostly used for divorces, often when Muslim women want a “Talaq” certificate Credit: Paul Grover

As they have grown, so too has their controversy.

“The reason why they’re controversial is twofold,” says Prof Samia Bano, of the School of Oriental and African Studies, who specialises in Islamic family law. “First of all, there is a concern that they are parallel legal systems. Is this Islamic law being practised through the back door in a way which usurps and undermines English family law?”

“The second concern is about what is going on in these privatised spaces. Are women who go to these bodies experiencing undue pressures or coercion to potentially reconcile with their husbands, who may be problematic? Are there other family law disputes that are being discussed in these spaces, without any knowledge of the state law?”

‘Inherently discriminatory’

Submissions to a 2018 Home Office report on the Muslim courts included testimony from women who said Imams tried to force them to return to their husbands in cases of serious domestic violence.

One woman, referred to as Maryam, said Imams repeatedly telephoned her to persuade her to meet a husband who had violently abused and sexually assaulted her. “These Imams just don’t listen – they try and force you back to your husband no matter what, and feel they have the right to disturb your life,” she said.

Another woman, Ayesha, said a Sharia council repeatedly refused to let her divorce her husband even after he attacked her while she was pregnant and attempted to throw her daughter out the window.

A separate letter from Southall Black Sisters, a domestic abuse charity, was signed by 300 abused women and voiced concerns that “hard line” clerics presided over Sharia councils in Britain.

How to get help | Domestic violence and abuse

The following organisations offer support over the phone:

The Freephone National Domestic Abuse Helpline – 0808 2000 247. Round the clock support, every day of the year nationaldahelpline.org.uk

Respect Men's Advice Line – 0808 8010 327 (Monday to Friday 10am to 8pm). Or visit the webchat at [Men's Advice Line](https://men.safelives.org.uk)

Anyone can call [Karma Nirvana](https://www.karnanirvana.org.uk) on 0800 5999 247 (Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm) for forced marriage and honour crimes

[Muslim Women's Network Helpline](https://www.muslimwomen.org.uk) – 0800 999 578. Culturally sensitive and multi-lingual helpline that is confidential and non-judgmental

If you're worried someone might see you have visited this page, [the Women's Aid website tells you how to cover your tracks online](https://www.womensaid.org.uk).

Rahila Gupta, the chairman of Southall Black Sisters, says: “We have consistently campaigned against the entrenchment of parallel religious laws be they sharia courts, Beth Dins or Sikh courts – especially in matters of family law – because their judgments reveal a patriarchal bias against women’s rights and freedoms.”

Ms Namazie claims Sharia councils are “inherently discriminatory”.

“Many women face humiliating, dangerous and discriminatory treatment at the hands of Sharia bodies,” she says.

Southall Black Sisters also claimed in its submission to the 2018 Home Office review that Imams on Sharia law courts were “often corrupt, primarily interested in making money and abusing their positions of power.”

Bano says high fees charged by some had led to allegations they were little more than “money-making schemes”.

“The concern is that [women] might be told, ‘In order for you to be issued a Muslim divorce certificate, you need to transfer £5,000 to your husband,’” Bano says. “There’s little oversight because these bodies operate unofficially.”

Supporters of Sharia councils say the tribunals are helping to ease the [severe pressure on the County Court system](#), which was described as “dysfunctional” in a July report from the justice select committee.

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Sheikh Hamad Chaudhry, from Manchester Sharia Council, argues that organisations like his save the taxpayer money by helping people resolve disputes privately. “All of these religious institutes save the Government millions,” he says.

He adds that the services offered by Islamic tribunals in the UK are more like “mediation” or “marriage counselling” than anything comparable to courts of law.

“We do everything in accordance with the law. There’s no clash,” Chaudhry says. “If anything contradicts the law, then we won’t do it, we have to step back, whether it’s custody or visitations.” Manchester Sharia council works closely with police and social services, he adds.

Tracey Pook, a community engagement officer at Didsbury Central Mosque, which posted the Sharia Law Administrator job advert, says the courts simply aim to provide “religious guidance” within the boundaries of British law. People are free to follow or ignore the advice if they so choose, she adds.

Can sharia law fit into Britain’s legal system?

☐ Yes – as long as services work strictly within the British law system

☐ No – its a slippery slope and a threat to British values

Total votes: 6,191

Chaudhry argues that the rise of Sharia courts in Britain is almost entirely being driven by demand from Muslim women seeking the “Talaq” divorce certificates.

“People come here voluntarily,” he says, adding: “The rulings that we use here are the most lax ones. If you don’t like your husband anymore, you have a right to leave him.”

He adds that costs typically range between £100 and £400 per divorce.

Lack of oversight

Even if Britain’s Sharia councils are acting within the bounds of the law, there are “legitimate concerns” about their power and influence, Bano says, particularly when it comes to especially conservative or patriarchal interpretations of Islamic doctrine.

A key problem is a lack of supervision. Britain’s Sharia councils largely operate outside the official official arbitration system. The only exception is the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal, which is mainly used for commercial disputes.

There are fears that the system represents a challenge to the principles of liberal democracy, effectively operating as a “shadow system” in parallel to official courts.

Such criticism ultimately led to the Home Office investigation, ordered by Theresa May while she was home secretary, as part of a counter-extremism strategy.

Ultimately the conclusions drawn in 2018 felt like something of a fudge. Ministers refused to regulate Sharia courts for fear of endorsing their practices, but also refused to prohibit them so as not infringe on people’s right to religious freedom.

Chris Philp, the shadow home secretary, believes the state should have stepped in to regulate the courts.

He says: “We need this sector to urgently be regulated properly so that vulnerable women and girls are not discriminated against. We must ultimately have only one law in this country – the one passed by our democratically elected Parliament.”

However, not everyone agrees. Tice argues: “Allowing them to fit into our legal system is a slippery slope into allowing Sharia Law to be conducted in the UK.”

Bano says: “My position is that these bodies ideally shouldn’t exist. We really need to resolve disputes via state law. We can all be critical of state law, but it’s still the best protector.”

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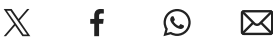


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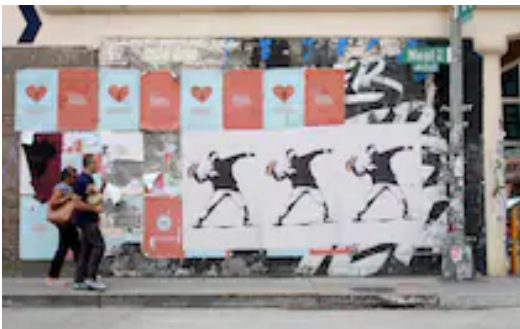


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